

Oxford, the Cotswolds & Around



Dripping with charm and riddled with implausibly pretty villages, this part of the country is as close to the old-world English idyll as you'll get. It's a haven of lush rolling hills, rose-clad cottages, bucolic views and graceful stone churches and is a magnet for tourists and commuters alike.

For some, the glut of thatched roofs, cream teas and antique shops is far too quaint, but get off the tourist trail, find your own romantic bolthole and you'll soon see why it is that A-list celebrities and the merely moneyed rush to buy property here. The honey-coloured villages, fire-lit inns and grandiose manors are very persuasive in their charms.

Beyond this rural Arcady lies the legendary city of Oxford, home to the world-famous university and the academic elite. Renowned for its beautiful colleges, top-notch museums and dreamy atmosphere, it's a great base for exploring the area. To the south, the Queen herself has a weekend pad, the majestic Windsor Castle, and nearby are the sedate and intellectual charms of the scholarly town of Eton.

To the west, you'll find the genteel sophistication of Regency Cheltenham and the elegant cloisters of the magnificent Gloucester Cathedral, and to the east there's the Rothschild pile, Waddesdon Manor, and the unexpected exotica of Woburn Safari Park.

Most of the attractions in this chapter are an easy day trip from London, but Oxford and the Cotswolds deserve at least an overnight stay. Although there is good public transport in the region, a car allows you to get off the beaten track and away from the crowds. Be prepared for busy roads in the summer months, especially around the Cotswolds.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Following in the footsteps of Lyra, Tolkien, CS Lewis and Inspector Morse as you tour the **Oxford colleges** (p226)
- Discovering deserted **Cotswold villages** (p240) straight out of medieval England
- Soaking up the atmosphere in the Queen's very own hideaway, **Windsor Castle** (p269)
- Feeling the hairs on the back of your neck rise as you revel in the reverberations at a concert in **Gloucester Cathedral** (p260)
- Immersing yourself in an African odyssey on a tour through **Woburn Safari Park** (p266)



History

The Bronze Age chalk horse at Uffington and the Iron Age hill fort close by are some of the earliest evidence of settlement in this part of England. In Roman times, the region was traversed by a network of roads, some of which still exist today, and as word of the good hunting and fertile valleys spread, the region became heavily populated.

By the 11th century, the wool and grain trade had made the locals rich, William the Conqueror had built his first motte and bailey in Windsor, and the Augustinian abbey in Oxford had begun training clerics. In the 12th century, Henry II fortified the royal residence at Windsor by adding a stone tower and protective walls, and in the 13th century, Oxford's first colleges were established along with its reputation as England's foremost centre of learning.

Meanwhile, local farmers continued to supply London with corn, wool and clothing. The Cotswolds in particular flourished and amassed great wealth. By the 14th century, the wool merchants were rolling in money and happy to show off their good fortune by building the beautiful villages and graceful wool churches that still litter the area today.

The region's proximity to London also meant that it became a popular retreat for wealthy city dwellers. The nobility and aristocracy flocked to Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire, building country piles as retreats from the city, while the labourers who had once been so important to the wool trade were made redundant by increasing mechanisation and moved back to the towns and cities. Today, the area remains affluent and is home to busy commuters and is a popular choice for wealthy Londoners looking for second homes.

Information

The popularity of the Cotswolds as a holiday destination means that you'll find helpful tourist offices in all towns and a wealth of information on the area. Outside the Cotswolds, the region is far less visited and information points can be rather thin on the ground. St Albans and Windsor are your best bets for assistance, or visit www.visitsoutheastengland.com and www.enjoyengland.com for the local low-down.

Activities

Walking or cycling through the Cotswolds is an ideal way to get away from the crowds and discover some of the lesser-known vistas and villages of the region. You'll also find great walking and cycling opportunities in Buckinghamshire's leafy Chiltern Hills and along the meandering River Thames. For more information, see the Outdoor England chapter (p141) or specific suggestions for walks and rides throughout this chapter.

CYCLING

Gentle gradients and scenic vistas make the Cotswolds ideal for cycling, with only the steep western escarpment offering a challenge to the legs. Plenty of quiet country lanes and gated roads criss-cross the region, or follow the waymarked **Thames Valley Cycle Way** (NCN routes 4, 5).

Mountain bikers can use a variety of bridleways in the **Cotswolds** and **Chilterns**, and in the west of the region the **Forest of Dean** has many dirt-track options, and some dedicated mountain-bike trails.

WALKING

The **Cotswold Hills** offer endless opportunities for day hikes, but if you're looking for something more ambitious, the **Cotswold Way** (www.nationaltrail.co.uk/Cotswold) is an absolute classic. The route covers 102 miles from Bath to Chipping Campden and takes about a week to walk.

Alternatively, the **Thames Path** (www.nationaltrail.co.uk/thamespath) follows the river downstream from its source near Cirencester to London. It takes about two weeks to complete the 184-mile route, but there's a very enjoyable five-day section from near Cirencester to Oxford.

Finally the 87-mile **Ridgeway National Trail** (www.nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway) meanders along the chalky grassland of the Wiltshire downs near Avebury, down into the Thames Valley and then along the spine of the Chilterns to Ivinghoe Beacon near Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire offering wonderful views of the surrounding area.

Getting There & Around

Thanks to its proximity to London and the rash of commuters who live in the area, there are frequent trains and buses here from the capital. Getting across the region by public transport can be frustrating and time

consuming, though. Renting a car gives you the most freedom, but be prepared for busy roads in the Cotswolds during the summer months and daily rush-hour traffic closer to London.

Traveline (☎ 0871-2002233; www.traveline.org.uk) provides timetable information on all public transport.

BUS

Major bus routes are run by **Stagecoach** (www.stagecoachbus.com) and **Arriva** (www.arrivabus.co.uk) with a host of smaller companies offering services to local towns and villages. See the destination information for specific details of routes.

If you plan to do a lot of travelling by bus, there are a variety of bus passes available that allow unlimited travel across the region. Check routes before buying, however, as bad connections can rot up your best-laid plans.

Arriva offers the **Go Anywhere** (£7) ticket that allows you unlimited use of its services across the UK (excluding London) for a day. The better-value Stagecoach **Explorer** and **Megarider** tickets allow one-/seven-/28-day travel across southern England (excluding London) for £8/20/75.

TRAIN

For general rail information, call **National Rail** (☎ 08457-48 49 50; www.nationalrail.co.uk).

If you're planning a lot of rail travel in southern England, it may be worth investing in a **Network Railcard** (www.railcard.co.uk; per yr £20), which allows you and three other adults a 33% discount on rail tickets and up to four children (five to 15 years) a 60% discount. There are some restrictions on travel (such as discounts being only available after 10am on weekdays), but if you're travelling with family or friends it can make for great savings.

OXFORDSHIRE

The whiff of old money, academic achievement and genteel living wafts from Oxfordshire's well-bred, well-preened pores. Rustic charm, good manners and grand attractions are in abundant supply here, with a host of charming villages surrounding the world-renowned university town.

Oxford is a highlight on any itinerary with over 1500 listed buildings, a choice of excellent museums and an air of refined sophistication. Its gorgeous colleges, hushed quads and gowned cyclists seem little changed by time.

Yet there is a lot more to the county. Just to the north is Blenheim Palace, an extravagant baroque pile that's the birthplace of Sir Winston Churchill, while to the south is the elegant riverside town of Henley, famous for its ever-so-posh Royal Regatta.

Activities

As well as the long-distance national trails, walkers may be interested in the **Oxfordshire Way**, a scenic, 65-mile waymarked trail running from Bourton-on-the-Water to Henley-on-Thames, and the **Wychwood Way**, a historic, 37-mile route from Woodstock, which runs through an ancient royal forest. The routes are divided up into manageable sections, described in leaflets available from most local tourist offices and libraries.

The quiet roads and gentle gradients also make Oxfordshire good cycling territory. The main waymarked route through the county is the **Oxfordshire Cycleway**, which takes in Woodstock, Burford and Henley. If you don't have your own wheels, you can hire bikes in Oxford (p235).

You'll find more information at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/countryside.

Getting Around

You can pick up bus and train timetables for most routes at local tourist offices. The main train stations are in Oxford and Banbury and have frequent connections to London Paddington and Euston, Hereford, Birmingham, Bristol and Scotland.

The main bus operators are the **Oxford Bus Company** (☎ 01865-785400; www.oxfordbus.co.uk) and **Stagecoach** (☎ 01865-772250; www.stagecoachbus.com/oxfordshire).

OXFORD

pop 134,248

The genteel city of Oxford is a privileged place, renowned as one of the world's most famous university towns, soaked in history, dripping with august buildings and yet incredibly insular. The 39 colleges that make up the University jealously guard their elegant honey-coloured buildings, and, once

inside their grounds, a reverent hush and studious calm descends.

Oxford is highly aware of its international standing and yet is remarkably restrained for a city driven by its student population. It's a conservative, bookish kind of place where academic achievement and intellectual ideals are the common currency. The University buildings wrap around narrow cobbled lanes, gowned cyclists blaze along the streets and the vast library collections run along shelves deep below the city streets.

Oxford is a wonderful place to ramble: the oldest colleges date back almost 750 years and little has changed inside the hallowed walls since then. But along with the rich history and tradition, there is a whole other world beyond the college walls. Oxford has a long industrial past and was birthplace of the Morris motor car as well as of Mensa. Today, the new Mini runs off the production lines and the real-world majority still outnumber the academic elite. Along with the all that fine architecture, world-class museums and historic pubs is a working city home to disadvantaged council estates, the usual glut of high-street chain shops and plenty of chi chi restaurants, trendy bars and expensive boutiques.

History

Strategically placed at the confluence of the Rivers Cherwell and Thames (called the Isis here, from the Latin *Tamesis*), Oxford was a key Saxon town heavily fortified by Alfred the Great during the war against the Danes.

By the 11th century, the Augustinian abbey in Oxford had begun training clerics, and when Henry II banned Anglo-Norman students from attending the Sorbonne in 1167, the abbey began to attract students in droves. Whether bored by the lack of distractions or revolted by the ignorance of the country folk we'll never know, but the new students managed to create a lasting enmity with the local townspeople, culminating in the St Scholastica's Day Massacre in 1355 (see boxed text, p226). Thereafter, the king ordered that the university be broken up into colleges, each of which then developed its own traditions.

The first colleges Balliol, Merton and University, were built in the 13th century, with at least three more being added in each of the following three centuries. Newer colleges, such as Keble, were added in the 19th and 20th centuries to cater for an ever-

expanding student population. However, old habits die hard at Oxford, and it was 1877 before lecturers were allowed to marry, and another year before female students were admitted. Even then, it still took another 42 years before women would be granted a degree for their four years of hard work. Today, there are 39 colleges that cater for about 20,000 students, and in 2008 the last all-female college, St Hilda's, eventually opened its door to male students.

Meanwhile, the arrival of the canal system in 1790 had a profound effect on the rest of Oxford. By creating a link with the Midlands' industrial centres, work and trade suddenly expanded beyond the academic core. However, the city's real industrial boom came when William Morris began producing cars here in 1913. With the success of his Bullnose Morris and Morris Minor, his Cowley factory went on to become one of the largest motor plants in the world. Although the works have been scaled down since their heyday, new Minis still run off BMW's Cowley production line today.

Orientation

Oxford is fairly compact and can easily be covered on foot. Carfax Tower makes a good central landmark and is a short walk from the bus and train stations, which are conveniently located close to the centre of town.

The university buildings are scattered throughout the city, with the most important and architecturally significant in the centre. Jericho, in the northwest, is the trendy, artsy end of town, with slick bars and restaurants and an art-house cinema, while Cowley Rd, southeast of Carfax, is the edgy student and immigrant area packed with cheap places to eat and drink. Further out, in the salubrious northern suburb of Summertown, you'll find more upmarket restaurants and bars.

Information

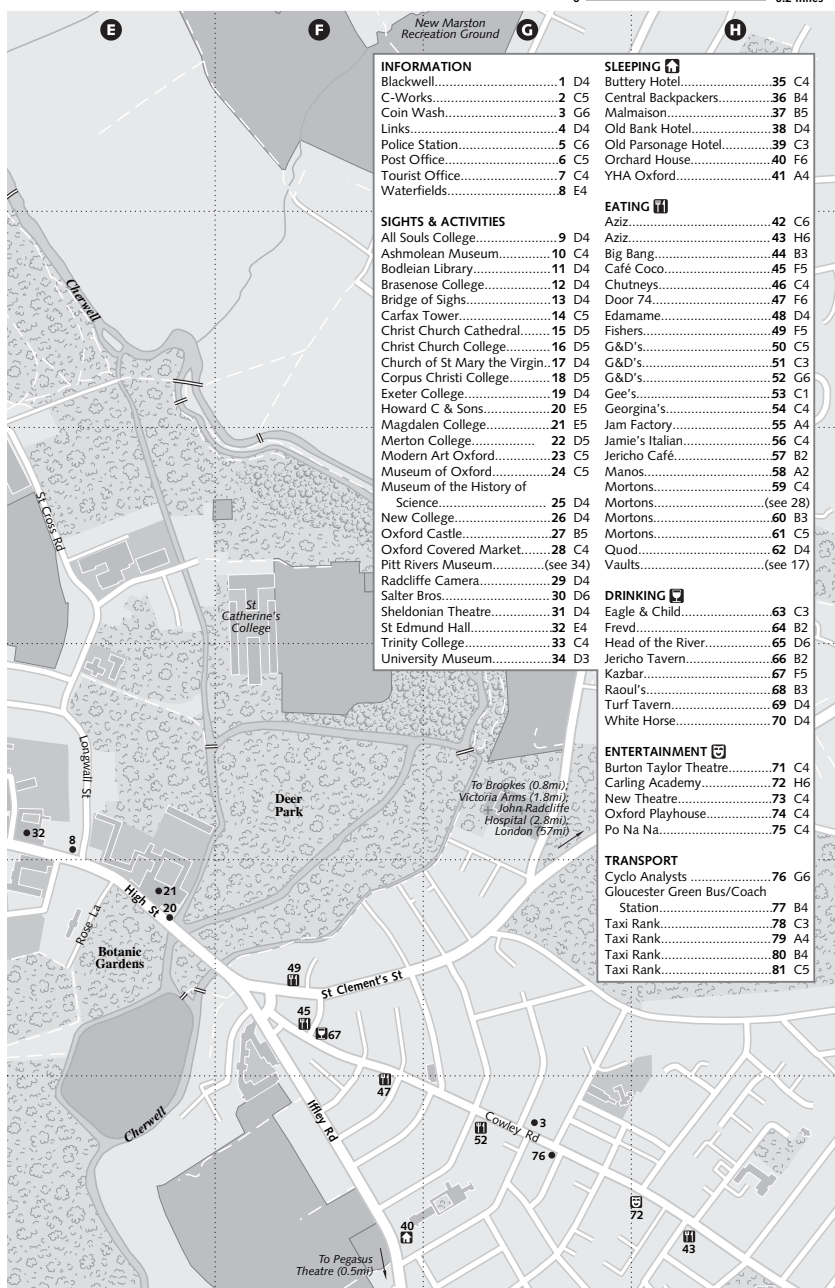
BOOKSHOPS

Blackwell (☎ 01865-333000; www.blackwell.co.uk; 48-51 Broad St) 'The Knowledge Retailer' stocks any book you could ever need.

Waterfields (☎ 01865-721809; www.waterfieldsbooks.co.uk; 52 High St) Collection of rare, secondhand and antiquarian books.

EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 0845 8 505 505; St Aldate's)

**INFORMATION**

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| Coin Wash..... | 3 | G6 |
| Links..... | 4 | D4 |
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| Fishers..... | 49 | F5 |
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| G&D's..... | 51 | C3 |
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| Jamie's Italian..... | 56 | C4 |
| Jericho Café..... | 57 | B2 |
| Manos..... | 58 | A2 |
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| Frevd..... | 64 | B2 |
| Head of the River..... | 65 | D6 |
| Jericho Tavern..... | 66 | B2 |
| Kazbar..... | 67 | F5 |
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| Carling Academy..... | 72 | H6 |
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ST SCHOLASTICA'S DAY MASSACRE

The first real wave of students arrived in Oxford in the 12th century, and right from the start an uneasy relationship grew between the townspeople and the bookish blow-ins. Name calling and drunken brawls escalated into full-scale riots in 1209 and 1330, when browbeaten scholars abandoned Oxford to establish new universities in Cambridge and Stamford respectively. The riots of 10 and 11 February 1355, changed everything, however, and left a bitter scar on relations for hundreds of years.

It all began when celebrations for St Scholastica's Day grew out of hand and a drunken scuffle spilled into the street. Years of simmering discontent and frustrations let loose, and soon students and townspeople took to each other's throats. The chancellor ordered the pealing of the university bells and every student who heard it rushed to join the brawl. By the end of the day, the students had claimed victory and an uneasy truce was called.

The next morning, however, the furious townspeople returned with the help of local villagers armed with pickaxes, shovels and pikes. By sundown, 63 students and 30 townspeople were dead. King Edward III sent troops to quell the rioting and eventually decided to bring the town under the control of the university.

To prove its authority, the university ordered the mayor and burgesses (citizens) to attend a service and pay a penny for every student killed on the anniversary of the riot each year. For 470 years, the vengeful practice continued, until one mayor flatly refused to pay the fine. His successors all followed suit, but it took another 130 years for the university to extend the olive branch and award a Doctorate of Civil Law to Mayor William Richard Gowers, MA, Oriel in 1955.

INTERNET ACCESS

C-Works (☎ 01865-722044; 1st fl, New Bailey Hse, New Inn Hall St; per 50min £1; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, to 7pm Sun)

Links (☎ 01865-204207; 33 High St; per 45min £1; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-8pm Sun)

INTERNET RESOURCES

Try these sites if you want to get the low-down on local happenings.

Daily Info (www.dailyinfo.co.uk) Daily listings for events, gigs, performances, accommodation and jobs.

Oxford City (www.oxfordcity.co.uk) Accommodation and restaurant listings as well as entertainment, activities and shopping.

Oxford Online (www.visitoxford.org) Oxford's official tourism website.

LAUNDRY

Coin Wash (127 Cowley Rd; per load £3.50; ☎ 8am-10pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

John Radcliffe Hospital (☎ 01865-741166; Headley Way, Headington) Three miles east of the city centre.

MONEY

You'll find that every major bank and ATM is handily represented on or close to Cornmarket St.

POST

Post office (☎ 0845-7223344; 102 St Aldate's; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon, 9.30am-5.30pm Tue, 9am-5.30pm Wed-Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 01865-252200; www.visitoxford.org; 15-16 Broad St; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat, to 6pm Thu-Sat Jul & Aug, 10am-4pm Sun) Stocks a *Welcome to Oxford* brochure (£1), which features a walking tour and college opening times, as well as the *University of Oxford* leaflet and *Oxford Accessible Guide* for travellers with disabilities. It can book accommodation for a £4 fee plus a 10% deposit.

UNIVERSITIES

Oxford Brookes (☎ 01865-484848; www.brookes.ac.uk; Gipsy Lane) Oxford's lesser-known university.

Oxford University (☎ 01865-270000; www.ox.ac.uk)

Sights

UNIVERSITY BUILDINGS & COLLEGES

Christ Church College

The largest and grandest of all of Oxford's colleges, **Christ Church** (☎ 01865-276492; www.chch.ox.ac.uk; St Aldate's; adult/under 16yr £4.90/3.90; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 1-5pm Sun) is also its most popular. The magnificent buildings, illustrious history and latter-day fame as a location for the Harry Potter films have tourists coming in droves.

The college was founded in 1525 by Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, who suppressed 22

monasteries to acquire the funds for his lavish building project. Over the years numerous luminaries have been educated here including Albert Einstein, philosopher John Locke, poet WH Auden, Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) and 13 British prime ministers.

The main entrance is below imposing **Tom Tower**, the upper part of which was designed by former student Sir Christopher Wren. Great Tom, the 7-ton tower bell, still chimes 101 times each evening at 9.05pm (Oxford is five minutes west of Greenwich), to sound the curfew imposed on the original 101 students.

Mere visitors, however, are not allowed to enter the college this way and must go further down St Aldate's to the side entrance. Immediately on entering is the 15th-century cloister, a relic of the ancient Priory of St Frideswide, whose shrine was once a focus of pilgrimage. From here, you go up to the **Great Hall**, the college's magnificent dining room, with its hammer-beam roof and imposing portraits of past scholars.

Coming down the grand staircase, you'll enter **Tom Quad**, Oxford's largest quadrangle, and from here, **Christ Church Cathedral**, the smallest cathedral in the country. Inside, brawny Norman columns are topped by elegant vaulting, and beautiful, stained-glass windows adorn the walls. Look out for a rare depiction of the murder of Thomas Becket.

You can also explore another two quads and the **Picture Gallery**, with its modest collection of Renaissance art. To the south of the college is **Christ Church Meadow**, a leafy expanse bordered by the Isis and Cherwell rivers and ideal for leisurely walking.

Magdalen College

Set amid 40 hectares of lawns, woodlands, river walks and deer park, **Magdalen** (mawd-len; ☎ 01865-276000; www.magd.ox.ac.uk; High St; adult/under 16yr £4/3; ☎ noon-6pm Jul-Sep, 1pm-6pm/dusk Oct-Jun) is one of the wealthiest and most beautiful of Oxford's colleges.

An elegant Victorian gateway leads into a medieval chapel, with its glorious 15th-century tower, and on to the remarkable cloisters, some of the finest in Oxford. The strange gargoyles and carved figures here are said to have inspired CS Lewis' stone statues in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Behind the cloisters, the lovely Addison's Walk leads through the grounds and along the banks of the River Cherwell for just under a mile.

Magdalen has a reputation as an artistic college, and some of its most famous students and fellows have included Oscar Wilde, Poet Laureate Sir John Betjeman and Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney.

The college also boasts a fine choir that sings *Hymnus Eucharisticus* at 6am on May Day (1 May) from the top of the 42m bell tower. The event now marks the culmination of a solid night of drinking for most students as they gather in their glad rags on Magdalen Bridge to listen to the dawn chorus.

Opposite the college and sweeping along the banks of the River Cherwell are the beautiful **Botanic Gardens** (☎ 01865-286690; www.botanic-garden.ox.ac.uk; adult/under 16yr £3/free; ☎ 9am-6pm May-Aug, to 4.30pm Oct-Apr). The gardens are the oldest in Britain and were founded in 1621 for the study of medicinal plants.

Sheldonian Theatre

The monumental **Sheldonian Theatre** (☎ 01865-277299; www.sheldon.ox.ac.uk; Broad St; adult/under 16yr £2/1; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-4.30pm Mon-Sat Mar-Oct, 10am-12.30pm & 2-3.30pm Mon-Sat Nov-Feb) was the first major work of Christopher Wren, at that time a university Professor of Astronomy. Inspired by the classical Theatre of Marcellus in Rome, it has a rectangular front end and a semicircular back, while inside, the ceiling of the main hall is blanketed by a fine 17th-century painting of the triumph of truth over ignorance. The Sheldonian is now used for college ceremonies and public concerts, but you can climb to the cupola for good views of the surrounding buildings.

Bodleian Library

Oxford's **Bodleian Library** (☎ 01865-277224; www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk; Broad St) is one of the oldest public libraries in the world, and one of England's three copyright libraries. It holds more than seven million items on 118 miles of shelving and has seating space for up to 2500 readers.

The oldest part of the library surrounds the stunning Jacobean-Gothic **Old Schools Quadrangle** (☎ 9am-5.15pm Mon-Fri, to 4.45pm Sat), which dates from the early 17th century. On the eastern side of the quad is the **Tower of Five Orders**, an ornate building depicting the five classical orders of architecture. On the west side is the **Divinity School** (adult/under 14yr £2/free; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 4.30pm Sat), the university's first teaching room. It is renowned as a masterpiece of 15th-century English Gothic

architecture and has a superb fan-vaulted ceiling. A self-guided **audio tour** (£2.50, 40 minutes) to these areas is available.

Most of the rest of the library is closed to visitors, but **library tours** (admission £6; ☎ tours 10.30am, 11.30am, 2pm & 3pm) allow access to the medieval Duke Humfrey's library, where, the library proudly boasts, no less than five kings, 40 Nobel Prize winners, 25 British prime ministers and writers such as Oscar Wilde, CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien studied. You'll also get to see 17th-century **Convocation House and Court**, where parliament was held during the Civil War. The tour takes about an hour and is not suitable for children under 11 years old.

Radcliffe Camera

Just south of the library is the **Radcliffe Camera** (Radcliffe Sq; ☎ no public access), the quintessential Oxford landmark and one of the city's most photographed buildings. The spectacular circular library was built between 1737 and 1749 in grand Palladian style, and boasts Britain's third-largest dome. The only way to see the library is to join an **extended tour** (£12), which also explores the warren of underground tunnels and passages leading to the library's vast book stacks. Tours take place once a month (more often in July and August) on Saturdays at 10.30am and last about an hour and a half. Advanced booking is recommended.

For excellent views of the Radcliffe Camera and surrounding buildings, climb the 14th-century tower in the beautiful **Church of Saint Mary the Virgin** (☎ 01865-279111; www.university-church.ox.ac.uk; High St; tower admission adult/under 16yr £2.50/1.50; ☎ 9am-6pm Jul & Aug, 9am-5pm Sep-Jun). On Sunday the tower does not open until about noon, after the morning service.

New College

From the Bodleian, stroll under the **Bridge of Sighs**, a 1914 copy of the famous bridge in Venice, to **New College** (☎ 01865-279555; www.new.ox.ac.uk; Holywell St; admission Easter-Sep £2, Oct-Easter free; ☎ 11am-5pm Easter-Sep, 2-4pm Oct-Easter). This 14th-century college was the first in Oxford to accept undergraduates and is a fine example of the glorious Perpendicular style. The chapel here is full of treasures including superb stained glass, much of it original, and Sir Jacob Epstein's disturbing statue of Lazarus.

During term time, visitors may attend the beautiful Evensong, a choral church service held nightly at 6pm. Access for visitors

is through the New College Lane gate from Easter to early October, and through the Holywell St entrance the rest of the year.

William Spooner was once a college warden here, and his habit of transposing the first consonants of words gave rise to the term 'spoonerism'. Local lore suggests that he once reprimanded a student by saying, 'You have deliberately tasted two worms and can leave Oxford by the town drain'.

Merton College

From the High St, follow the wonderfully named Logic Lane to **Merton College** (☎ 01865-276310; www.merton.ox.ac.uk; Merton St; admission free; ☎ 2-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun), one of Oxford's original three colleges. Founded in 1264, Merton was the first to adopt collegiate planning, bringing scholars and tutors together into a formal community and providing a planned residence for them. The charming 14th-century **Mob Quad** was the first of the college quads.

Just off the quad is a 13th-century **chapel** and the **Old Library** (admission on guided tour only), the oldest medieval library in use. It is said that Tolkien spent many hours here writing *The Lord of the Rings*. Other literary giants associated with the college include TS Eliot and Louis MacNeice.

During the summer months it may be possible to join a guided **tour** (£2, 45 minutes) of the college grounds. These usually take place in the afternoon, but are dependent on the availability of the graduate students who run them. If you're visiting in summer, look out for posters advertising candlelit concerts in the chapel.

All Souls College

One of the wealthiest of Oxford's colleges and unique in not accepting undergraduate students, **All Souls** (☎ 01865-279379; www.all-souls.ox.ac.uk; High St; admission free; ☎ 2-4pm Mon-Fri) is primarily an academic research institution. It was founded in 1438 as a centre of prayer and learning, and today fellowship of the college is one of the highest academic honours in the country. Each year, the university's top finalists are invited to sit a fellowship exam, with an average of only two making the grade annually.

Much of the college facade dates from the 1440s, and, unlike other older colleges, the front quad is largely unchanged in five centuries. It also contains a beautiful 17th-century

sundial designed by Christopher Wren. Most obvious, though, are the twin mock-Gothic towers on the north quad. Designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor in 1710, they were lambasted for ruining the Oxford skyline when first erected.

Other Colleges

Much of the centre of Oxford is taken up by graceful university buildings and elegant colleges, each one individual in its appearance and academic specialities. However, not all are open to the public. You'll find details of visiting hours and admission at www.ox.ac.uk/colleges.

Set back off Broad St, **Trinity College** (☎ 01865-279900; www.trinity.ox.ac.uk; Broad St; adult/under 16yr £1.50/75p; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri, 2-4pm Sat & Sun term time) is worth a visit for the exquisite carvings in its chapel and for Wren's beautiful Garden Quad.

Nearby **Exeter College** (☎ 01865-279600; www.exeter.ox.ac.uk; Turl St; admission free; ☎ 2-5pm) is known for its elaborate 17th-century dining hall and ornate Victorian Gothic chapel housing *The Adoration of the Magi*, a William Morris tapestry.

Small and select **Brasenose College** (☎ 01865-277830; www.bnc.ox.ac.uk; Radcliffe Sq; admission £1; ☎ 2-5pm) is an elegant 16th-century place with more charm than many of the larger colleges. Look out for the doorknocker hanging above the high table in the dining hall – and ask about its fascinating history.

The sole survivor of the original halls, the teaching institutions that preceded colleges in Oxford, medieval **St Edmund Hall** (☎ 01865-279000; www.seh.ox.ac.uk; Queen's Lane; admission free; ☎ noon-4pm Mon-Fri term time only) is worth a visit to see its small chapel decorated by William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones.

Sandwiched between Christ Church and Merton, you'll find the small and beautiful **Corpus Christi College** (☎ 01865-276700; www.ccc.ox.ac.uk; Merton St; admission free; ☎ 1.30-4.30pm). Look out for the pelican sundial in the middle of the front quad.

ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM

A vast, rambling collection of art and antiquities is on display at the mammoth **Ashmolean** (☎ 01865-278000; www.ashmolean.org; Beaumont St; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, noon-5pm Sun), Britain's oldest public museum. Established in 1683, it is based on the extensive collec-

tion of the remarkably well-travelled John Tradescant, gardener to Charles I, and it is housed in one of Britain's best examples of neo-Grecian architecture.

Bursting with Egyptian, Islamic and Chinese art; rare porcelain, tapestries and silverware; priceless musical instruments; and extensive displays of European art (including works by Raphael and Michelangelo), it's impossible to take it all in at once. At the time of writing, the Ashmolean was undergoing a £61 million redevelopment with 39 new galleries due to open in a state-of-the-art building in late 2009. The 'Treasures of the Ashmolean Museum' exhibition offers a cross-section of highlights from the vast collection. At the time of writing, the entire museum was due to close temporarily from January 2009, so check the website for up-to-date details.

UNIVERSITY & PITT RIVERS MUSEUMS

Housed in a glorious Victorian Gothic building with slender, cast-iron columns, ornate capitals and a soaring glass roof, the **University Museum** (☎ 01865-272950; www.oum.ox.ac.uk; Parks Rd; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm) is worth a visit for its architecture alone. However, the real draw is the mammoth natural-history collection of more than five million exhibits ranging from exotic insects and fossils to a towering T-Rex skeleton.

Pitt Rivers Museum (☎ 01865-270927; www.prm.ox.ac.uk; admission free; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Tue-Sun, noon-4.30pm Mon), hidden away through a door at the back of the main exhibition hall, is a treasure trove of weird and wonderful displays to satisfy every armchair adventurer's wildest dreams. In the half-light inside are glass cases and mysterious drawers stuffed with Victorian explorers' prized booty. Feathered cloaks, necklaces of teeth, blowpipes, magic charms, Noh masks, totem poles, fur parkas, musical instruments and shrunken heads lurk here, making it a fascinating place for adults and children. At the time of writing the museum was closed for renovations, due to reopen in spring 2009.

Both museums run workshops for children almost every weekend and are known for their child-friendly attitude.

OXFORD CASTLE

Oxford Castle Unlocked (☎ 01865-260666; www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk; 44-46 Oxford Castle; adult/under 15yr £7.50/5.35; ☎ 10am-5pm, last tour 4pm) explores the

THE BRAINS BEHIND THE OED

In 1879, the Oxford University Press began an ambitious project: a complete re-examination of the English language. The four-volume work was expected to take 10 years to complete. Recognising the mammoth task ahead, editor James Murray issued a circular appealing for volunteers to pore over their books and make precise notes on word usage. Their contributions were invaluable but after five years, Murray and his team had still only reached the word 'ant'.

Of the thousands of volunteers who helped out, the most prolific of all was Dr WC Minor, a US Civil War surgeon. Over the next 20 years, he became Murray's most valued contributor, providing tens of thousands of illustrative quotations and notes on word origins and usage. Murray received all of the doctor's contributions by post from Broadmoor, a hospital for the criminally insane. When he decided to visit the doctor in 1891 however, he discovered that Minor was not an employee but the asylum's longest-serving inmate, a schizophrenic committed in 1872 for a motiveless murder. Despite this, Murray was deeply taken by Minor's devotion to his project and continued to work with him, a story told in full in Simon Winchester's book *The Surgeon of Crowthorne*.

Neither Murray nor Minor lived to see the eventual publication of *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* in 1928. Almost 40 years behind schedule and 10 volumes long, it was the most comprehensive lexicographical project ever undertaken, and a full second edition did not appear until 1989.

Today, the updating of such a major work is no easier and the public were again asked for help in 2006. This time, the BBC ran a TV program, *Balderdash and Piffle*, encouraging viewers to get in contact with early printed evidence of word use, new definitions and brand-new entries for the dictionary. A second edition of the program was broadcast a year later.

For a full history of the famous dictionary and the development of printing, pay a visit to the **Oxford University Press Museum** (☎ 01865-353527; Great Clarendon St; admission free; ☒ by appointment only).

1000-year history of Oxford's castle and prison. Tours begin in the 11th-century Crypt of St George's Chapel, possibly the first formal teaching venue in Oxford, and continue on into the Victorian prison cells and the 18th-century Debtors' Tower where you can learn about the inmates' grisly lives, daring escapes and cruel punishments. You can also climb the Saxon St George's Tower, which has excellent views of the city, and clamber up the original medieval motte.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

Far removed from Oxford's musty hallways of history, **Modern Art Oxford** (☎ 01865-722733; www.modernartoxford.org.uk; 30 Pembroke St; admission free; ☒ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) is one of the best contemporary-art museums outside London, with a wonderful gallery space and plenty of activities for children.

Nearby, the **Museum of Oxford** (☎ 01865-252761; www.museumofoxford.org.uk; St Aldate's; admission free; ☒ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, noon-5pm Sat & Sun) is dedicated to the history of the city and its university, and explores everything from

Oxford's prehistoric mammoths to its history of car manufacturing.

Science, art, celebrity and nostalgia come together at the **Museum of the History of Science** (☎ 01865-277280; www.mhs.ox.ac.uk; Broad St; admission free; ☒ noon-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, 2-5pm Sun), where the exhibits include everything from a blackboard used by Einstein to the world's finest collection of historic scientific instruments, all housed in a beautiful 17th-century building.

Oxford's central landmark, **Carfax Tower** (☎ 01865-792653; adult/under 16yr £2.10/1; ☒ 10am-5.15pm Apr-Sep, to 4.15pm Mar & Oct, to 3pm Nov-Feb), is the sole reminder of medieval St Martin's Church and offers good views over the city centre.

A haven of traditional butchers, fishmongers, cobblers and barbers, the **Oxford Covered Market** (www.oxford-covered-market.co.uk; ☒ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) is the place to go for Sicilian sausage, handmade chocolates, traditional pies, funky T-shirts and expensive brogues. It's a fascinating place to explore and, if you're in Oxford at Christmas, a must for its traditional displays of freshly hung deer, wild boar, ostrich and turkey.

Activities

A quintessential Oxford experience, **punting** is all about sitting back and quaffing Pimms as you watch the dreaming spires float by. Which, of course, requires someone else to do the hard work – punting is far more difficult than it appears. Be prepared to spend much of your time struggling to get out of a tangle of low branches or avoiding the path of an oncoming eight. For tips on how to punt, see p434.

Punts are available from mid-March to mid-October, 10am to dusk, and hold five people including the punter (£12/14 per hour weekdays/weekends).

The most central location to rent punts is at Magdalen Bridge, from **Howard C & Sons** (☎ 01865-202643; High St; deposit £30). From here, you can punt downstream around the Botanic Gardens and Christ Church Meadow or upstream around Magdalen Deer Park. Alternatively, head for the **Cherwell Boat House** (☎ 01865-515978; www.cherwellboathouse.co.uk; Bardwell Rd; deposit £60) for a countryside amble, where the destination of choice is the busy boozier, the **Victoria Arms** (☎ 01865-241382; Mill Lane). To get to the boathouse, take bus 2 or 7 from Magdalen St to Bardwell Rd and follow the signposts.

Tours

Blackwell (☎ 01865-333606; oxford@blackwell.co.uk; 48-51 Broad St; adult/child £6.50/4; ☹ late May-Oct) Oxford's most famous bookshop runs 1½-hour tours including a literary tour (2pm Tuesday, 11.30am Thursday), an 'Inklings' – an informal literary group whose membership included CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien – tour (11.45am Wednesday) and a town-and-gown tour (2pm Friday).

City Sightseeing (☎ 01865-790522; www.citysightseeingoxford.com; adult/under 16yr £11.50/6; ☹ every 10-15min 9.30am-6pm Apr-Oct) Runs hop-on-hop-off bus tours from the bus and train stations or any of the 20 dedicated stops around town.

Tourist office (☎ 01865-252200; www.visitoxford.org; 15-16 Broad St; ☹ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) Runs two-hour tours of Oxford city and colleges (adult/under 16yr £7/3.50; ☹ 11am & 2pm year-round, also 10.30am & 1pm July and August), Inspector Morse tours (£7.50/4; ☹ 1.30pm Sat), family walking tours (£5.50/3.50; ☹ 1.30pm school holidays) and a selection of themed tours (adult/child £7.50/4) that run on various dates throughout the year.

Oxford River Cruises (☎ 08452-269396; www.oxfordrivercruises.com) Choose from a range of Thames tours including river sightseeing trips (adult/child £15/7.50; 50 minutes) and lunchtime picnics trips (adult/under 12

years £42/29) Thursday and Sunday March to October, plus sunset dinner cruises (£42) Wednesday and Saturday May to September.

Oxon Carts (☎ 07747-024600; www.oxoncarts.com; 15min taster tour £10, 1hr tour £30) Runs a fleet of five pedicabs around Oxford's narrow lanes where the buses simply can't go. Passengers receive a copy of a 1904 map of the city and a personal guide to its buildings and history.

Salter Bros (☎ 01865-243421; www.salterssteamers.co.uk; Folly Bridge; boat trips adult/child £8.50/4.80; ☹ mid-May–mid-Sep) Boat trips along the Isis to Abingdon.

Sleeping

Oxford accommodation is generally overpriced and underwhelming, with suffocating floral patterns the B&B norm. The following places stand out for their value for money and good taste. Book ahead between May and September, and if you're stuck you'll find a string of B&Bs along the Iffley, Abingdon, Banbury and Headington roads.

BUDGET

Oxford Camping & Caravanning Club (☎ 01865-244088; www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk; 426 Abingdon Rd; sites per person £9) This well-run campsite is conveniently close to the city centre but consequently lacks character and can be noisy. It's a popular spot however, especially on weekends, so book well in advance.

Central Backpackers (☎ 01865-242288; www.centralbackpackers.co.uk; 13 Park End St; dm £16-19; ☹) A good budget option right in the centre of town, this small hostel has basic, bright and simple rooms that sleep four to 12 people. There's a small but decent lounge with satellite TV, a rooftop terrace and free internet and luggage storage.

Oxford YHA (☎ 0845 371 9131; www.yha.org.uk; 2A Botley Rd; dm/d £22/56; ☹) Bright, well-kept, clean and tidy, this is Oxford's best budget option with simple but comfortable dorm accommodation, private rooms and loads of facilities including a restaurant, library, garden, laundry and a choice of lounges. All rooms are en suite and are bright and cheery, a far better option than some of the city's cheapest B&Bs.

MIDRANGE

Oxford Rooms (www.oxfordrooms.co.uk; r£40-120) Didn't quite make the cut for a place at Oxford? Well at least you can experience life inside the hallowed college grounds and breakfast in a grand college hall by staying overnight in one of their student rooms. Most rooms

are singles and pretty functional with basic furnishings, shared bathrooms and internet access, though there are some en suite, twin and family rooms available. Some rooms have old-world character and views over the college quad, while others are more modern but in a nearby annexe.

There's limited availability during term time, but a good choice of rooms during university holidays, and you'll get a full description before you book.

Beaumont (☎ 01865-241767; www.oxfordcity.co.uk/accom/beamont; 234 Abingdon Rd; s £45-55, d £60-78) A class above most B&Bs at this price, this place is all crisp, white linen, pale and trendy flock wallpaper, mosaic bathrooms and beautiful, hand-picked furniture. The simple but elegant decor gives it a really tranquil atmosphere, despite being close to the city centre.

Cornerways (☎ 01865-240135; jeakings@btopenworld.com; 282 Abingdon Rd; s £48, d £76-98; 📍) Bright, modern rooms with simple but attractive decor make this a good bet within walking distance of town. The genial hosts can help with planning your stay, and breakfast is served in a lovely conservatory overlooking the small patio garden.

Tilbury Lodge (☎ 01865-862138; www.tilburylodge.com; 5 Tilbury Lane; s £70, d £80-90; 📍) Spacious, top-of-the-line rooms with plush, modern decor and excellent bathrooms make this stylish B&B worth the trip outside the centre of town. Giant pillows in funky fabrics adorn the big beds, light streams through the large windows and, downstairs, there's a conservatory for guest use.

ourpick Orchard House (☎ 01865-249200; www.theorchardhouseoxford.co.uk; 225 Iffley Rd; s £75-85, d £85-95; 📍) Set in beautiful secluded gardens just a short walk from the city centre, this lovely arts-and-crafts-style house is a wonderful retreat from the city. The two bedrooms are sleek and stylish and very spacious, each with its own sofa and breakfast table, and the limestone bathrooms are luxuriously modern.

Burlington House (☎ 01865-513513; www.burlington-house.co.uk; 374 Banbury Rd; s £65, d £85-95; 📍) Simple, elegant rooms decked out in restrained, classical style are available at this Victorian merchant house. The rooms are big, bright and uncluttered, with plenty of period character and immaculately kept bathrooms. Burlington isn't central, but it has good public transport to town and is well worth the trip.

Buttery Hotel (☎ 01865-811950; www.thebutteryhotel.co.uk; 11-12 Broad St; s/d from £60/95; 📍) Right in the heart of the city with views over the college grounds, the Buttery is Oxford's newest hotel. Considering its location, it's a great deal, with spacious, modern rooms, decent bathrooms and the pick of the city's attractions on your doorstep.

Remont Guesthouse (☎ 01865-311020; www.remont-guesthouse.co.uk; 367 Banbury Rd; s £82, d £107-135, tr £135; 📍) All modern style, subtle lighting and plush furnishings, this 25-room guest house is a bit of a hike from the city centre but has regular buses just outside the door. The rooms here are decked out in cool neutrals with silky bedspreads and abstract art on the walls, and the flat-screen TVs, soundproofing, free wi-fi and modern garden just add to the appeal.

TOP END

Malmaison (☎ 01865-268400; www.malmaison-oxford.com; 3 Oxford Castle; d/ste from £160/245; 📍) Lock yourself up for the night in one of Oxford's most spectacular settings. This former Victorian prison has been converted into a sleek and slinky hotel with plush interiors, sultry lighting, dark woods and giant beds. If you're planning a real bender, go for the Governor's Suite, complete with four-poster bed and mini cinema. Look out for online promotions when you can bag a room for as little as £99.

ourpick Old Parsonage Hotel (☎ 01865-310210; www.oldparsonage-hotel.co.uk; 1 Banbury Rd; r £170-250; 📍) Wonderfully quirky and instantly memorable, the Old Parsonage is a small boutique hotel with just the right blend of old-world character, period charm and modern luxury. The 17th-century building oozes style with a contemporary-art collection, artfully mismatched furniture and chic bedrooms with handmade beds and marble bathrooms.

Old Bank Hotel (☎ 01865-799599; www.oldbank-hotel.co.uk; 92 High St; r £185-325; 📍) Slap bang in the centre of Oxford, rooms here look over the college walls and dreaming spires into the very heart of the university. The rooms are sleek and spacious, all neutral colours and silky throws but lack a little soul. Downstairs the buzzing restaurant, Quod (see opposite), makes up for it with brash modern artworks and a tumult of eager diners.

Eating

Oxford has plenty of choice when it comes to eating out, but unfortunately ubiquitous

chain restaurants dominate the scene, especially along George St and around the pedestrianised square at the castle. Head to Walton St in Jericho, to St Clements, Summertown or up the Cowley Rd for a more quirky selection of restaurants.

BUDGET

our pick **Edamame** (☎ 01865-246916; 15 Holywell St; sushi £2.50-3.50, mains £6-7; ☺ lunch Wed-Sun, dinner Thu-Sat) You'll find this tiny Japanese place by looking for the queue out the door as you head down Holywell St, but it's well worth the wait. The food here is simply divine with the best rice and noodle dishes in town and sushi (Thursday night only) to die for.

Manos (☎ 01865-311782, 105 Walton St; mains £6-9; ☺ closed Sun dinner) For delicious home-cooked tastes of the Med, head for this Greek deli and restaurant where you'll find a great selection of dishes bursting with flavour. The ground floor has a cafe and deli, while downstairs has more style and comfort, with giant cushions surrounding low tables.

Jericho Cafe (☎ 01865-310840; 112 Walton St; mains £7-9) Chill out and relax with the paper over a coffee and a doorstep of cake, or go for some of the wholesome lunch and dinner specials, which encompass everything from sausages and mash to Lebanese lamb *kibbeh*. There are plenty of hearty salads, lots of choice for vegies and bulging platters of meze.

Cafe Coco (☎ 01865-200232; 23 Cowley Rd; mains £7-14) Chilled out but always buzzing, this Cowley Rd institution is a sort of hip hang-out, with classic posters on the walls and a bald clown in an ice bath. The food is vaguely Mediterranean, with everything from pizzas to *merguez* thrown in, and can be a bit hit and miss but most people come for the atmosphere.

Quick Eats

Vaults (☎ 01865-279112; Church of St Mary the Virgin; mains £3.25-4.95; ☺ 10am-5pm) Does a great selection of wholesome soups, salads, pastas and paellas with plenty of choice for vegetarians. Set in a vaulted 14th-century Congregation House with lovely gardens, overlooking Radcliffe Sq, it's one of the most beautiful lunch venues in Oxford.

Georgina's (☎ 01865-249527; Ave 3, Oxford Covered Market; mains £5-8; ☺ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Sat) Hidden up a scruffy staircase in the covered market and plastered with old cinema posters, this is a funky little cafe serving a bumper crop of

bulging salads, hearty soups and such goodies as goat's cheese quesadillas and scrumptious cakes.

A couple of chains worth keeping your eye out for:

G&D's (☺ 8am-midnight) Cowley Rd (104 Cowley Rd); Little Clarendon St (☎ 01865-516652; 55 Little Clarendon St); St Aldate's (94 St Aldate's) The best ice cream, brownies and desserts in town. You'll also get copies of the *Beano and Dandy* and regular silly-hat, cow-dunking and mooing competitions.

Mortons (baguettes £2.40-2.80) Broad St (22 Broad St); Little Clarendon St (36 Little Clarendon St); New Inn Hall St (22 New Inn Hall St); Oxford Covered Market (☎ 01865-200867; 103 Covered Market) For a quick bite en route between colleges, the ever-popular Mortons has a fine selection of baguettes.

MIDRANGE

Aziz (☎ 01865-794945; 228 Cowley Rd; mains £8-10) Thought by many to be Oxford's best curry house, this award-winning restaurant attracts vegans, vegetarians and curry lovers in hoards. There's an extensive menu, chilled surroundings and portions generous enough to ensure you'll be rolling out the door. There's a second branch on Folly Bridge (☎ 01865-247775).

Jam Factory (☎ 01865-244613; www.thejamfactory.oxford.com; 27 Park End St; mains £8-12) Arts centre, bar and restaurant rolled into one, the Jam Factory is a laid-back, boho kind of place, with changing exhibitions and hearty breakfasts, an excellent-value, £10 two-course lunch and an understated menu of modern British dishes.

Door 74 (☎ 01865-203374; 74 Cowley Rd; mains £8-13; ☺ closed Mon & Sun dinner) This cosy little place woos its fans with a rich mix of largely Mediterranean flavours, friendly service and a quirky interior. The menu is limited, but each dish is cooked to perfection and combines classic ingredients with a modern twist.

Jamie's Italian (☎ 01865-838383; 24-26 George St; mains £8-18) Celebrity chef Jamie Oliver's new 'neighbourhood' restaurant is all rustic Italian, with wooden crates of freshly made pasta tempting you from the windows and a menu of authentic but affordable Italian dishes. Packed since opening, the crowds come as much for the name as the heaped plates of bruschetta and the steaming bowls of pasta.

Quod (☎ 01865-202505; www.quod.co.uk; 92 High St; mains £10.50-15.50) Bright, buzzing and decked out with modern art and beautiful people, this designer joint dishes up Mediterranean brasserie-style food to the masses. It doesn't

take reservations, is always heaving and, at worst, will tempt you to chill by the bar with a cocktail while you wait.

Other options:

Big Bang (☎ 01865-511441; 124 Walton St; mains £8-12) Dated decor, but packed to the gills, thanks to its simple menu of divine sausages and mash.

Chutneys (☎ 01865-724241; 36 St Michael's St; mains £8-11) Top-notch Indian with consistently great food and chilled atmosphere.

Fishers (☎ 01865-243003; 36-37 St Clements; mains £9-15) Oxford's finest seafood restaurant with simple but heavenly plates of Shetland mussels, yellow-fin tuna and New England lobster.

TOP END

Gee's (☎ 01865-553540; www.gees-restaurant.co.uk; 61 Banbury Rd; mains £15-21.50) Set in a Victorian conservatory, this top-notch restaurant is a sibling of Quod's but much more conservative. Popular with the visiting parents of university students, the food is modern British and European and the setting stunning, but it's all a little stiff.

Drinking

PUBS

Turf Tavern (☎ 01865-243235; 4 Bath Pl) Hidden away down narrow alleyways, this tiny medieval pub is one of the town's best-loved and bills itself as 'an education in intoxication'. It's always heaving with a mix of students, professionals and the lucky tourists who manage to find it, and has plenty for outdoor seating for sunny days.

Eagle & Child (☎ 01865-302925; 49 St Giles) Affectionately known as the 'Bird & Baby', this atmospheric place has been a pub since 1650 and is still a hotchpotch of nooks and crannies. It was once the favourite haunt of Tolkien, CS Lewis and their literary friends and still attracts a mellow crowd.

White Horse (☎ 01865-728318; 52 Broad St) This tiny olde-worlde place was a favourite retreat for TV detective Inspector Morse, and it can get pretty crowded in the evening. It's got buckets of character and makes a great place for a quiet afternoon pint and intellectual conversation.

Oxford has some wonderful riverside pubs worth checking out, most of which can be reached by a stroll along the towpaths:

Head of the River (☎ 01865-721600; Folly Bridge) Right in the centre of town and a great place to watch struggling punters go by.

Fishes (☎ 01865-249796; North Hinksey; mains £10-17.50) Old and quaint on the outside but sleek and modern inside, this popular summer haunt also does good food.

Trout (☎ 01865-302071; 195 Godstow Rd; mains £10-15.50) Charming old-world pub with a modern interior, lovely garden and roaming peacocks. Book ahead if you plan to eat.

BARS

Raoul's (☎ 01865-553732; 32 Walton St) This trendy retro-look bar is one of Jericho's finest and is always busy. Famous for its perfectly mixed cocktails and funky music, it's populated by effortlessly cool punters trying hard not to spill their drinks as people squeeze by.

Kazbar (☎ 01865-202920; 25-27 Cowley Rd) This funky Moroccan-themed bar has giant windows, low lighting, warm colours and a cool vibe. It's buzzing most nights with hip young things sipping cocktails and filling up on the Spanish and North African tapas (£3 to £5).

Jericho Tavern (☎ 01865-311775; 56 Walton St) Chilled out and super cool with big leather sofas, tasselled lamps and boldly patterned wallpaper, this hip bar also has a live-music venue upstairs. Adorned with giant portraits of John Peel, Supergrass and Radiohead, it's supposedly where Radiohead (who hail from nearby Abingdon) played their first gig.

Frevd (☎ 01865-311171; 119 Walton St) Once a neoclassical church, now a happening bar, Frevd is a cavernous place with soaring ceilings, distressed walls, quirky artwork and a mixed bag of punters. It's popular with a young style-conscious clientele and cocktail-sipping luvvies by night.

Entertainment

NIGHTCLUBS

Despite its large student population, Oxford's club scene is fairly limited, with several cattle-mart clubs in the centre of town and a lot of crowd-pleasing music. Try the following for something a little more adventurous.

Carling Academy (☎ 01865-813500; www.carling-academy.co.uk; 190 Cowley Rd; club admission up to £6; ☎ box office noon-5.30pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat) Oxford's best club and live-music venue had a recent makeover and now hosts everything from big-name DJs to indie sounds, hard rock, funk nights and chart-busting bands.

Po Na Na (☎ 01865-249171; 13-15 Magdalen St; admission up to £6; ☎ Thu-Sat) Looking a little rough around the edges now, this small cave-like place is hung with Moroccan lanterns and

drapes and, in between the regular club nights, attracts some big-name DJs and live events. Expect funk, soul, electro, drum 'n' bass, house and indie rock.

THEATRE

The city's main stage for quality drama is the **Oxford Playhouse** (☎ 01865-305305; www.oxfordplayhouse.com; Beaumont St), which also hosts an impressive selection of touring theatre, music and dance productions. Just around the corner, the **Burton Taylor Theatre** (☎ 01865-305305; www.burtontaylor.co.uk; Gloucester St) puts on quirky student shows, while the **Pegasus Theatre** (☎ 01865-722851; www.pegasustheatre.org.uk; Magdalen Rd) holds alternative independent productions.

For ageing pop stars, comedians and plenty of fanfare, try the **New Theatre** (☎ 0870 606 3500; www.newtheatreoxford.org.uk; George St), and for drama, dance, live music and art, there's the **North Wall Arts Centre** (☎ 01865-319452; www.thenorthwall.com; South Parade).

Performing in a variety of non-traditional venues including city parks, the BMW plant and Oxford Castle, **Creation Theatre** (☎ 01865-761393; www.creationtheatre.co.uk) produces highly original, mostly Shakespearean shows featuring plenty of magic and special effects. If you're in town when a performance is running, don't miss it.

CLASSICAL MUSIC

With a host of spectacular buildings with great acoustics and two orchestras, Oxford is an excellent place to attend a classical concert. You'll find the widest range of events at www.musicatxford.com. Alternatively, watch out for posters around town or contact one of these groups:

City of Oxford Orchestra (☎ 01865-744457; www.cityofoxfordorchestra.co.uk)

Oxford Contemporary Music (☎ 01865-488369; www.ocmevents.org)

Oxford Philomusica (☎ 01865-736202; www.oxfordphil.com)

Getting There & Away

BUS

Oxford's main bus/coach station is at **Gloucester Green**, in the heart of the city. Competition on the Oxford-London route is fierce, with two companies running buses (£15 return, four per hour) at peak times. Services run all through the night and take about 90 minutes to reach central London:

Oxford Express (☎ 01865-785400; www.oxfordbus.co.uk)

Oxford Tube (☎ 01865-772250; www.oxfordtube.com)

The **Heathrow Express** (£18, 70 minutes) runs half-hourly 4am to 10pm and at midnight and 2am, while the **Gatwick Express** (£22, two hours) runs hourly 5.15am to 8.15pm and every two hours 10pm to 4am.

National Express has five direct buses to Birmingham (£11, two hours), and one service to Bath (£9.50, two hours) and Bristol (£13.80, 2¾ hours). All these destinations are easier to reach by train.

Stagecoach serves most of the small towns in Oxfordshire and runs the X5 service to Cambridge (£9, 3½ hours) roughly every half-hour. If you're planning a lot of bus journeys it's worth buying a Goldrider pass (£20), which allows unlimited bus travel in Oxfordshire for seven days.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Thanks to a complicated one-way system and a shortage of parking spaces, driving and parking in Oxford is a nightmare. Drivers are strongly advised to use the five park-and-ride car parks on major routes leading into town. Three car parks are free to use, the others cost £1. The return bus journey to town (10 to 15 minutes, every 10 minutes) costs £2.50.

TRAIN

There are half-hourly services to London Paddington (£22.50, one hour) and roughly hourly trains to Birmingham (£22, 1¼ hours), Worcester (£29, 1½ hours) and Hereford (£17.40, two hours). Hourly services also run to Bath (£19.60, 1¼ hours) and Bristol (£21.40, 1½ hours), but require a change at Didcot Parkway.

Getting Around

BICYCLE

The *Cycle into Oxford* map available from the tourist office shows all local cycle routes. You can hire bikes from **Cyclo Analysts** (☎ 01865-424444; 150 Cowley Rd; per day/week £14/40).

BUS

If sightseeing has worn you out, buses 1 and 5 go to Cowley Rd from Carfax, 2 and

7 go along Banbury Rd from Magdalen St, and 16 and 35 run along Abingdon Rd from St Aldate's.

A multi-operator Plus Pass (per day/week/month £5/17/46) allows unlimited travel on Oxford's bus system.

TAXI

There are taxi ranks at the train station and bus station, as well as on St Giles and at Carfax. Be prepared to join a long queue after closing time. For a green alternative, call **Oxon Carts** (☎ 07747 024600; info@oxoncarts.com), a pedicab service.

WOODSTOCK

pop 2389

The charming village of Woodstock is full of picturesque creeper-clad cottages, elegant town houses, brecker roofs, art galleries and antique shops. It's an understandably popular spot, conveniently close to Oxford, yet a quintessential rural retreat. The big draw here is Blenheim Palace, the opulent country pile of the Churchill family, but the village itself is a gracious and tranquil spot even on busy summer days.

The hub of the village is the imposing **town hall**, built at the Duke of Marlborough's expense in 1766. Nearby, the **Church of St Mary Magdalene** had a 19th-century makeover but retains its Norman doorway, early English windows and a musical clock.

Opposite the church, the **Oxfordshire Museum** (☎ 01993-811456; Park St; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 2-5pm Sun) has displays on local history, art, archaeology and wildlife. It also houses the **tourist office** (☎ 01993-813276).

Blenheim Palace

One of the country's greatest stately homes, **Blenheim Palace** (☎ 08700 602080; www.blenheimpalace.com; adult/under 16yr £16.50/10, park & garden only £9.50/4.80; ☎ 10.30am-5.30pm daily mid-Feb-Oct, Wed-Sun Nov-mid-Dec, park open year-round) is a monumental baroque fantasy designed by Sir John Vanbrugh and Nicholas Hawksmoor between 1705 and 1722. The land and funds to build the house were granted to John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, by a grateful Queen Anne after his decisive victory at the 1704 Battle of Blenheim. Now a Unesco World Heritage Site, Blenheim (pronounced *blen-num*) is home to the 11th duke and duchess.

Inside, the house is stuffed with statues, tapestries, ostentatious furniture and giant oil paintings in elaborate gilt frames. Highlights include the **Great Hall**, a vast space topped by 20m-high ceilings adorned with images of the first duke in battle; the opulent **Saloon**, the grandest and most important public room; the three **state rooms** with their plush decor and priceless **china cabinets**; and the magnificent 55m **Long Library**.

From the library, you can access the **Churchill Exhibition**, which is dedicated to the life, work and writings of Sir Winston, who was born at Blenheim in 1874 (see boxed text, p45). For an insight into life below stairs, the **Untold Story** exhibition explores the family's history through the eyes of the household staff.

If the crowds in the house become too oppressive, retire to the lavish gardens and vast parklands, parts of which were landscaped by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. To the front, an artificial lake sports a beautiful bridge by Vanbrugh, and a mini train is needed to take visitors to a maze, adventure playground and butterfly house. For a quieter and longer stroll, glorious walks lead to an arboretum, cascade and temple.

Sleeping & Eating

Woodstock has a good choice of accommodation, but it's not cheap. Luxurious, old-world hotels are the thing here so plan a day trip from Oxford if you're travelling on a budget.

Laurel's Guesthouse (☎ 01993-812583; www.laurels-guesthouse.co.uk; 40 Hensington Rd; s/d £75/80; closed Dec & Jan; Ⓟ) Packed with Victorian charm and character, this comfortable B&B has rooms featuring cast-iron or ornate wood beds, antique furniture and open fireplaces. The rooms are small and the bathrooms are tiny, but it's the period charm you'll remember.

Kings Arms Hotel (☎ 01993-813636; www.kings-hotel-woodstock.co.uk; 19 Market St; s/d £75/140; Ⓟ) Set in a lovely Georgian town house, the rooms are sleek and stylish with warm woods, soft, neutral tones and black-and-white images on the walls. Downstairs, there's a bright bistro serving modern British fare (mains £10 to £15) and a good bar with leather sofas and cheaper snacks.

Bear Hotel (☎ 01993-811124; www.macdonald-hotels.co.uk/bear; Park St; d from £92; Ⓟ Ⓞ) One of England's oldest hotels, the lavish Bear has long been a hideaway for romantic couples. The 13th-century coaching inn has recently

been refurbished and, along with the open fireplaces, stone walls and exposed beams, you'll get the height of modern luxury. Book in advance and you could be in for a great deal.

Hampers (☎ 01993-811535; 31-33 Oxford St; snacks £1.50-5; ☺ lunch) On a fine day you couldn't do better than a picnic in the grounds of the palace, and this deli provides all the essential ingredients: fine cheeses, olives, cold meats, Cotswold smoked salmon and delicious cakes. If it's raining, pop in to the cafe and feast on the delicious soups, sambos and cakes instead.

Brotherton's Brasserie (☎ 01993-811114; 1 High St; mains £9-14; ☺ closed Tue in winter) Set in an atmospheric 17th-century house clad in Virginia creeper and lit with the warm glow of gaslight, this popular brasserie is one of the best spots in town. Deep-red walls, scrubbed wooden floors and bare tables give it a rustic but homely feel, and the menu features everything from light pastas to hearty wild boar casserole.

Getting There & Away

Stagecoach bus 20 runs every half-hour (hourly on Sunday) from Oxford bus station (20 minutes). **Cotswold Roaming** (☎ 01865-308300; www.cotswold-roaming.co.uk) offers a Cotswolds/Blenheim combination tour (adult/under 15 years £40/27.50), with a morning at Blenheim and a half-day Cotswolds tour in the afternoon. The price includes admission to the palace.

DORCHESTER & THE WITTENHAMS

A winding street flanked on either side by old coaching inns, quaint cottages and timber-framed buildings flows through sleepy **Dorchester-on-Thames**. The town's main draw is the magnificent medieval church, **SS Peter & Paul** (www.dorchester-abbey.org.uk; admission free; ☺ 8am-6pm), or Dorchester Abbey, as it is more commonly known. It is a beautiful space, built on the site of a Saxon cathedral and home to a wonderful Jesse window, a rare Norman font and, in the Cloister Gallery, a collection of medieval decorated stones. There's also a small **museum** (admission free; ☺ 2-5pm Apr-Sep) in the Old School Room in the grounds.

From the village you can take a pleasant 3-mile walk to **Wittenham Clumps**, two ancient tree-topped hills offering wonderful views of the surrounding area. At the bottom of the hills lies the village of **Little Wittenham**, a rustic idyll. Known for its beautiful cottages and the

imposing **St Peter's Church**, it has made its mark on the international sporting calendar by hosting the **Pooh Sticks World Championships** in March each year. Teams from all over the world compete by dropping sticks into the river and watching them 'race' to the finish line.

In nearby **Clifton Hampden**, you'll find a row of stunning thatched cottages and the atmospheric 15th-century **Barley Mow Inn** (☎ 01865-407847; Clifton Hampden), where Jerome K Jerome wrote most of his timeless classic *Three Men in a Boat*.

Buses 105 and 106 connect Dorchester with Oxford (45 minutes, hourly Monday to Saturday). To get to Clifton Hampden, take bus X39 to Berinsfield and change to bus 107 (25 minutes in total, five daily Monday to Saturday). Dorchester-on-Thames is on the A4074, 7 miles south of Oxford. Clifton Hampden is on the A415.

HENLEY-ON-THAMES

pop 10,513

A conservative but well-heeled kind of place, Henley is an attractive town set on the banks of the river, studded with elegant stone houses, a few Tudor relics and a host of chichi shops. The town bursts into action in July when it becomes the location for the Henley Royal Regatta, a world-famous boat race and weeklong posh picnic hosted by high-end corporate entertainers.

The **tourist office** (☎ 01491-578034; www.visit-henley-on-thames.com; The Barn, King's Rd; ☺ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Jun-Sep, to 4pm Mar-May & Oct, to 3pm Nov-Feb) is next to the handsome town hall.

Sights

Life in Henley has always focused on the river, and the impressive **River & Rowing Museum** (☎ 01491-415600; www.rrm.co.uk; Mill Meadows; museum only adult/child £3.50/2.50, museum & Wind in the Willows adult/under 18yr £7/5; ☺ 10am-5.30pm May-Aug, 10am-5pm Sep-Apr) takes a look at the town's relationship with the Thames, the history of rowing and the wildlife and commerce the river supports. Hands-on activities and interactive displays make it a good spot for children, and the *Wind in the Willows* exhibition brings Kenneth Grahame's stories of Ratty, Mole, Badger and Toad to life.

Walking around Henley, you'll come across a wealth of historic buildings, with many Georgian gems lining Hart St, the main drag. You'll also find the imposing **town hall**

here, and the 13th-century **St Mary's Church** with its 16th-century tower topped by four octagonal turrets.

Festivals & Events

HENLEY ROYAL REGATTA

The first ever Oxford and Cambridge boat race was held in Henley in 1839, and ever since the cream of English society has descended on this small town each year for a celebration of boating, back slapping and the beau monde.

The five-day **Henley Royal Regatta** (☎ 01491-572153; www.hrr.co.uk) has grown into a major fixture in the social calendar of the upwardly mobile, and is a massive corporate entertainment opportunity. These days, hanging out on the lawn swilling champagne and looking rich and beautiful is the main event, and although rowers of the highest calibre compete, most spectators appear to take little interest in what's happening on the water.

The regatta is held in the first week of July, but you'll need contacts in the rowing or corporate worlds to get tickets in the stewards' enclosure. Mere mortals should head for the public enclosure (tickets £11 to £14), where you can lay out your gourmet picnic and hobnob with the best of them.

HENLEY FESTIVAL

In the week following the regatta, the town continues its celebrations with the **Henley Festival** (☎ 01491-843404; www.henley-festival.co.uk), a vibrant black-tie affair that features everything from big-name international stars to quirky, alternative acts – anything from opera to rock, jazz, comedy and swing. The main events take place on a floating stage on the Thames, and tickets vary in price from £59 for a seat in the grandstand to £35 for a space on the promenade.

Sleeping & Eating

Henley has a good choice of accommodation, especially at the top end, but if you're planning to visit during either festival, book well in advance.

Apple Ash (☎ 01491-574198; www.appleash.com; Woodlands Rd, Harpsden Woods; s/d £50/70 **P**) Lovingly maintained and beautifully decorated, it's well worth the 2-mile trip from town to stay at this charming Edwardian country house. The rooms are spacious and dripping in period character, but the styling is modern and

comfortable, with pale fabrics and plenty of scatter cushions.

Old School House (☎ 01491-573929; www.oldschoolhousehenley.co.uk; 42 Hart St; d £75-85; **P**) This small, quiet guesthouse in the town centre is a 19th-century school house in a walled garden, with a choice of two pretty guest rooms decked out in simple but comfortable style. Exposed timber beams and rustic furniture give it plenty of character, and the central location can't be beaten at this price.

Milsoms (☎ 01491-845789; www.milsomshotel.co.uk; 20 Market Pl; r £95) Set in an 18th-century former bakery, Milsoms offers sleek and stylish rooms, with bespoke artwork, subtle lighting and a muted colour scheme. They can be pretty compact, though, so ask for light and airy room 1 for more space. Downstairs, Loch Fyne (☎ 01491-845780; mains £10 to £18) serves its usual impeccably prepared fish dishes in bright surroundings.

our pick Hotel du Vin (☎ 01491-848400; www.hotelduvin.com; New St; d £145-295; **P** **Q**) Set in the former Brakspears Brewery, this upmarket hotel chain scores highly for its blend of industrial chic and top-of-the-line designer sophistication. The spacious rooms and opulent suites are slick and stylish and are matched by a walk-in humidor, incredible billiards rooms, huge wine cellar and a popular bistro (mains £15 to £21).

Green Olive (☎ 01491-412220; 28 Market Pl; meze £4-10) A popular Henley haunt, Green Olive dishes up piled plates of traditional Greek meze in a bright and airy building with a lovely garden to the rear. Choose from over 50 dishes including spanakopitta, souvlaki, mussels with feta, stifado and moussaka.

Chez Gerard Brasserie (☎ 01491-411099; 40 Hart Street; mains £9-15) A welcome addition to the Henley restaurant scene, this stalwart chain of French brasseries has a chilled atmosphere, wooden floors, modern art on the walls and a selection of mismatched furniture. The menu features French classics as well as Moroccan *tagines*, pastas and grills.

Getting There & Around

There are no direct train or bus services between Henley and Oxford. Trains to London Paddington take about one hour (£12.50, hourly).

If you fancy seeing the local area from the river, **Hobbs & Son** (☎ 01491-572035; www.hobbs-of-henley.com) runs hour-long afternoon river

trips from April to September (adult/under 16 years £7/5) and hires five-seater rowing boats (£13 per hour) and four-seater motorboats (£25 per hour).

WANTAGE

pop 10,613

Sleepy but handsome Wantage is a medieval market town of sturdy timber-framed buildings, old coaching inns and crooked cottages. The market square is dominated by a statue of Alfred the Great (see p37), who was born here in AD 849, and traders still flog their wares beneath his feet every Wednesday and Saturday. To the west of the square is the beautiful 13th-century church of St Peter & St Paul, with its hammer-beam roof and beautiful corbels. Wantage also provides easy access to the ancient Ridgeway trail (see p220), less than 3 miles to the south.

There's a **visitor information point** (☎ 01235-760176; www.wantage.com; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat) in the **Vale & Downland Museum** (☎ 01235-771447; www.wantage.com/museum; Church St; adult/student under 25yr £2.50/1; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat). Set in a converted 16th-century cloth merchant's house, the museum covers local geology and archaeology, as well as everything from King Alfred and Victorian kitchens to the local Williams Formula 1 team.

Sleeping & Eating

Courthill Centre (☎ 01235-760253; www.courthill.org.uk; Court Hill; d/m per adult/under 18yr £16.50/12.50, tepee £70) Set in a series of converted barns just 500m from the Ridgeway, this hostel is an ideal base for walkers. It has basic but spacious dorms, an oak-beamed dining room and excellent views over the Vale. There's also a choice of family rooms and tepees (sleeping six) to rent. The hostel is about 2 miles south of Wantage off the A338.

DETOUR: OLDE BELL

With country pubs all getting a makeover and everyone jumping on the gastropub band wagon, it can sometimes be hard to choose where to go. Just outside Henley, however, is a gastropub extraordinaire complete with designer interior and perfectly mismatched furniture, sheepskin throws and open fires. **Olde Bell** (☎ 01628-825881; www.theoldebells.co.uk; Hurley) is within easy striking distance of London, and popular with well-heeled patrons keen to dine on the superb modern British food (mains £10 to £14) dished up in chic surroundings. It's not all new-world sophistication here, though: you'll still get the exposed beams, tasteful knick-knacks and even tea cosies knitted by the local WI (Women's Institute).

Hurley is on the A4130, 8 miles east of Henley.

Manor Farm (☎ 01235-763188; www.manorfarm-wantage.co.uk; Silver Lane, West Challow; s/d £45/75; ☎) By far the most atmospheric place to stay in the area, this early-15th-century Queen Anne manor house makes a wonderful base and is incredible value for money. The charming rooms have high ceilings, cast-iron fireplaces, antique furniture and buckets of period style.

King Alfred's Head (☎ 01235-765531; 31 Market Pl; mains £9.50-11.50; ☎ closed Mon) The best bet in town for food, this rustic pub serves everything from bangers and mash to tagliatelle with butternut squash, walnut and sage. The rustic interior is full of old church pews and scrubbed tables, while the courtyard garden is a good bet on sunny days.

Getting There & Away

Bus X30 runs directly from Monday to Saturday to Oxford (35 minutes, hourly).

AROUND WANTAGE

Uffington White Horse

One of England's oldest chalk carvings, the **Uffington White Horse** is a stylised image cut into a hillside almost 3000 years ago. No-one is sure why the people of the time went to so much trouble to create the image or what exactly it is supposed to represent, but the mystery only adds to the sense of awe. This huge figure measures 114m long and 49m wide but is best seen from a distance, or, if you're lucky enough, from the air, because of the stylised lines of perspective.

Just below the figure is **Dragon Hill** – so called because it is believed that St George slew the dragon here – and above it the grass-covered earthworks of **Uffington Castle**. From the Courthill Centre, near Wantage, a wonderful 5-mile walk leads along the Ridgeway to the White Horse.

HIGHWAYMAN'S HIDEOUT

Crooked Billet (☎ 01491-681048; www.thecrookedbillet.co.uk; Stoke Row; mains £12-20) Hidden down a back lane and surrounded by trees, the 17th-century Crooked Billet is an inn famous as the one-time hideout of highwayman Dick Turpin. Today it is little changed – beer is drawn directly from casks in the cellar and the low beams, flagstone floor and inglenook fireplace are all original.

However, it's the food that really draws the crowds here, with local produce being whipped into modern, mouth-watering fare such as warm pigeon salad with wild mushrooms and roast garlic, or venison fillet with McSweens haggis, baby spinach and roast figs. Book well in advance.

In the nearby village of Uffington, you can visit the lovely 13th-century **St Mary's Church**, known locally as the 'Cathedral of the Vale', and the **Uffington Museum** (☎ 01367-820259; Broad St; admission free; ☎ 2-5pm Sat & Sun Easter-Oct). The museum is set in the old school room featured in Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and features displays on the author, local history and archaeology.

THE COTSWOLDS

Glorious honey-coloured villages riddled with beautiful, old mansions, thatched cottages, atmospheric churches and rickety almshouses draw crowds of tourists to the Cotswolds, but, despite its popularity, it's easy to get off the beaten track.

The booming medieval wool trade brought the area its wealth and left it with such a glut of beautiful buildings that its place in history is secured for ever more. If you've ever craved exposed beams, dreamed of falling asleep under English-rose wallpaper or lusted after a cream tea in the mid-afternoon, there's no finer place to fulfil your fantasies.

This is prime tourist territory, however, and the most popular villages can be besieged by tourists and traffic in summer. Plan to visit the main centres early in the morning or late in the evening, focus your attention on the south or take to the hills on foot or by bike to avoid the worst of the crowds. Better still, just leave

the crowds behind and meander down deserted country lanes and bridleways until you discover your very own bucolic village seemingly undisturbed since medieval times.

Orientation & Information

The limestone hills of the Cotswolds extend across a narrow band of land east of the M5, stretching almost as far as Oxford at their widest point, north to Chipping Campden and almost as far south as Bath. Most of the region lies within Gloucestershire, but parts leak out into Oxfordshire, Wiltshire, Somerset, Warwickshire and Worcestershire. The Cotswolds are protected as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

For information on attractions, accommodation and events:

Cotswolds (www.the-cotswolds.org)

Cotswolds Tourism (www.cotswolds.com)

Oxfordshire Cotswolds (www.oxfordshirecotswolds.org)

Activities

The gentle hills of the Cotswolds are perfect for walking, cycling and riding.

The long-distance **Cotswold Way** (102 miles) gives walkers a wonderful overview of the area. The route meanders from Chipping Campden to Bath, with no major climbs or difficult stretches, and is easily accessible from many points en route if you fancy tackling a shorter section. Ask at local tourist offices for details of day hikes or pick up a copy of one of the many walking guides to the region.

Away from the main roads, the winding lanes of the Cotswolds make fantastic cycling territory, with little traffic, glorious views and gentle gradients. Again, the local tourist offices are invaluable in helping to plot a route.

A COTTAGE OF YOUR OWN

If you'd like to rent your own Cotswold cottage, try these websites:

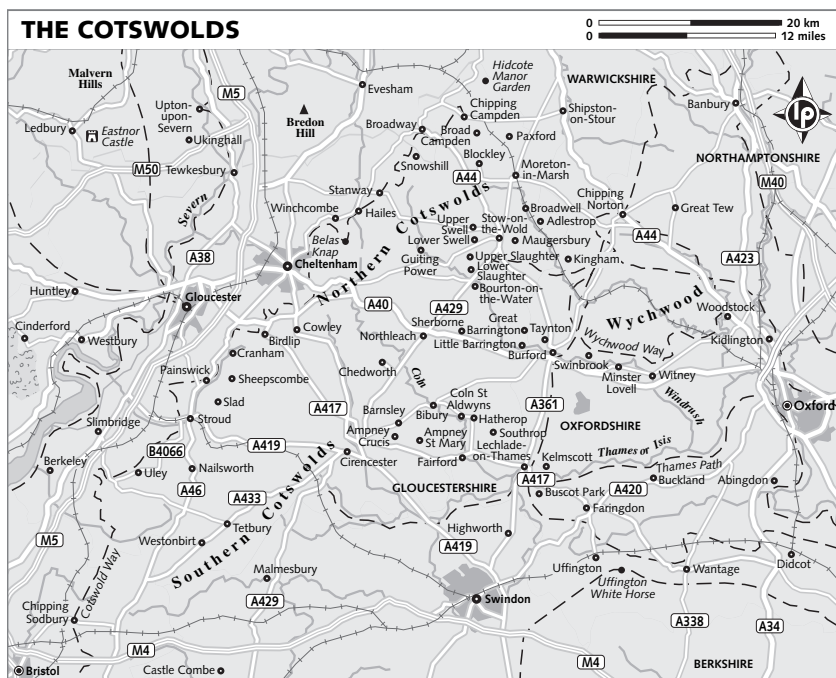
Campden Cottages (www.campdencottages.co.uk)

Cotswold Cottage Company (www.cotswoldcottage.co.uk)

Cotswold Cottages (www.cotswold-cottages.org.uk)

Cotswold Retreats (www.cotswoldretreats.co.uk)

Manor Cottages & Cotswold Retreats (www.manorcottages.co.uk)



For more information on companies operating self-guided and guided tours of the region, see the boxed text, p248.

Getting Around

Public transport through the Cotswolds is fairly limited, with bus services running to and from major hubs only, and train services just skimming the northern and southern borders. However, with a little careful planning and patience, you can see all the highlights. Tourist offices stock useful *Explore the Cotswolds* brochures with bus and rail summaries.

For the most flexibility, and the option of getting off the beaten track, your own car is unbeatable; car hire can be arranged in most major centres (see p807).

Alternatively, **Cotswold Roaming** (☎ 01865-308300; www.cotswold-roaming.co.uk) runs guided bus tours from Oxford between April and October. Half-day tours of the Cotswolds (adult/under 15 £20/12) include Minster Lovell, Burford and Bibury, while full-day tours of the North Cotswolds (adult/under 15 £30/20) feature Bourton-on-the-Water, Lower Slaughter, Chipping Campden and Stow-on-the-Wold.

WITNEY

pop 22,765

The sleepy town of Witney is firmly on Oxford's commuter belt, but make your way through the traffic and new housing developments to the centre of town and you'll find a charming village green flanked by pretty, stone houses. At one end is a glorious wool church and 18th-century almshouses, at the other a 17th-century covered market. Witney built its wealth through blanket production and the mills, wealthy merchants' homes and blanket factories can still be seen today. The baroque, 18th-century Blanket Hall dominates genteel High St, while at Wood Green you'll find a second village green and a cluster of stunning old stone cottages.

Pick up a copy of the *Witney Wool & Blanket Trail* from the **tourist office** (☎ 01993-775802; witney.tic@westoxon.gov.uk; 3 Welch Way; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Thu, to 5pm Fri, 9.30am-5pm Sat) to guide you around the town's old buildings and give you some insight into its history.

If you'd like to stay overnight, your best bet for a meal and a bed is the **fleece** (☎ 01993-892270; www.fleecewitney.co.uk; 11 Church Green; s/d £80/90;

A STEP BACK IN TIME

Squirreled away in the gorgeous village of Great Tew, is a pub little changed since medieval times, its flagstone floors, open fireplaces, low beams and outside loo all part of its 16th-century charm. The **Falkland Arms** (☎ 01608-683653; www.falklandarms.org.uk; Great Tew; r £80-110) sits right on the village green and plays host to a fine collection of local ales, ciders and wines. Traditional clay pipes and snuff are on sale behind the bar, and the clientele are a mix of lucky locals and those willing to make a special trip to enjoy its mellow atmosphere and beautiful surroundings. The food (mains £5 to £9) ranges from homemade soups and crusty baguettes to traditional Sunday roasts with all the trimmings; upstairs, the six guest rooms offer four-poster or cast-iron beds and period style. It doesn't get much more authentic than this.

Great Tew is about 4 miles east of Chipping Norton.

(P), a contemporary pub, restaurant and B&B on the main village green. The rooms are sleek and stylish, while the spacious brasserie (mains £9 to £15) offers an ambitious modern menu.

Stagecoach bus 100 runs from Oxford to Witney roughly every 20 minutes Monday to Saturday, hourly on Sunday (30 minutes). **Swanbrook** (www.swanbrook.co.uk) runs three buses Monday to Saturday (one on Sunday) between Cheltenham (£7, one hour) and Oxford (30 minutes) via Witney. This service also goes to Gloucester (£7, 1½ hours) and serves a number of Cotswold towns along the way including Northleach, Minster Lovell and Burford.

MINSTER LOVELL

pop 1200

Set on a gentle slope leading down to the meandering River Windrush, Minster Lovell is a gorgeous village with a cluster of stone cottages nestled beside an ancient pub and riverside mill. One of William Morris' favourite spots, the village has changed little since medieval times and is a glorious place for an afternoon pit stop, quiet overnight retreat or start to a valley walk.

The main sight here is the ruins of **Minster Lovell Hall**, the 15th-century manor-house home to Viscount Francis Lovell. Lovell fought with Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, and joined Lambert Simnel's failed rebellion after the king's defeat and death. Lovell's mysterious disappearance was never explained, and when a skeleton was discovered inside a secret vault in the house in 1708, it was assumed he had died while in hiding.

The **Mill & Old Swan** (☎ 0844 980 2313; www.deverevenues.co.uk; d £70-170; (P) (Q)) offers charming period-style rooms in the 17th-century

Old Swan or sleek, contemporary design in the 19th-century converted mill. The Old Swan serves decent pub food (£9 to £14).

Swanbrook coaches stop here on the Oxford to Cheltenham run. Stagecoach bus 233 between Witney and Burford stops here Monday to Saturday (10 minutes each way, 10 daily).

BURFORD

pop 1877

Slithering down a steep hill to a medieval crossing point on the River Windrush, the remarkable village of Burford is little changed since its glory days at the height of the wool trade. It's a stunningly picturesque place with higgledy-piggledy stone cottages, fine Cotswold town houses and the odd Elizabethan or Georgian gem. A glut of antique shops, tearooms and specialist boutiques peddle nostalgia to the hordes of visitors who make it here in summer, but despite the crowds it's easy to get off the main drag and wander along quiet side streets seemingly lost in time.

The helpful **tourist office** (☎ 01993-823558; Sheep St; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat Mar-Oct, to 4pm Mon-Sat Nov-Feb) provides the Burford Trail leaflet (10p) with information on walking in the local area.

Sights & Activities

Burford's main attraction lies in its incredible collection of buildings, including the 16th-century **Tolsey House** (Toll House; High St; admission free; ☎ 2-5pm Tue-Fri & Sun, 11am-5pm Sat Mar-Oct), where the wealthy wool merchants held their meetings. This quaint building perches on sturdy pillars and now houses a small museum on Burford's history.

Just off the High St, you'll find the town's 14th-century **almshouses** and the gorgeous

Church of St John the Baptist. The Norman tower here is topped by a 15th-century steeple, and inside you'll find a fine fan-vaulted ceiling and medieval screens dividing the chapels.

Younger visitors will enjoy a visit to the excellent **Cotswold Wildlife Park** (☎ 01993-823006; www.cotswoldwildlifepark.co.uk; adult/under 16yr £10/7.50; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Mar-Sep, to 3.30pm Oct-Feb), set around a Victorian manor house. The park is home to everything from penguins to white rhinos and giant cats.

If you have the time and fancy getting away from the crowds, it's worth the effort to walk east along the picturesque river path to the untouched and rarely visited village of **Swinbrook** (3 miles), where the beautiful church has some remarkable tombs.

Sleeping & Eating

Burford has a wonderful choice of atmospheric, upmarket hotels but far fewer options at more affordable prices.

Cotland House (☎ 01993-822382; www.cotlandhouse.com; Fulbrook Hill; s/d £40/70) A five-minute walk from town, this delightful B&B effortlessly mixes contemporary style with period charm. Although the rooms aren't spacious, they are gloriously comfortable with cast-iron beds, crinkly white linen and soft throws.

Westview House (☎ 01993-824723; www.westview-house.co.uk; 151 The Hill; d £65-85) This lovely old stone cottage has two bright and spacious guest rooms with plenty of period character. The Heritage Room has exposed beams, stone walls and a cast-iron bed, while the Windrush Room has its own private balcony overlooking the garden.

ourpick Lamb Inn (☎ 01993-823155; www.cotswold-inns-hotels.co.uk/lamb; Sheep St; r £145-255; ☎ wi-fi) Step back in time with a stay at the Lamb, a 15th-century inn just dripping with character. Expect flagstone floors, beamed ceilings, creaking stairs and a charming, laid-back atmosphere downstairs, and luxurious period-style rooms with antique furniture and cosy comfort upstairs. You'll get top-notch modern British food in the restaurant (three-course dinner £27 to 33) or less formal dining (mains £9 to £13) in the bar.

Angel (☎ 01993-822714; www.theangelatburford.co.uk; 14 Witney St; mains £15-16) Set in a lovely 16th-century coaching inn, this atmospheric brasserie serves up an innovative menu of modern British and European food. Dine-in by roar-

ing fires in winter, or eat al fresco in the lovely walled garden in warmer weather.

Getting There & Away

From Oxford, Swanbrook runs three buses a day (one on Sunday) to Burford (45 minutes) via Witney. Stagecoach bus 233 runs between Witney and Burford 10 times a day, Monday to Saturday (20 minutes). Bus 853 goes to Cheltenham three times daily Monday to Saturday and once on Sunday.

CHIPPING NORTON

pop 5688

The sleepy but attractive town of Chipping Norton – or 'Chippy' as it is locally known – is somewhat spoiled by the traffic running along the main street but has plenty of quiet side streets to wander and none of the Cotswold crowds. Handsome Georgian buildings, stone cottages and old coaching inns cluster around the market square, and on Church St you'll find a row of beautiful honey-coloured **almshouses** built in the 17th century. Further on is the secluded **Church of St Mary**, a classic example of the Cotswold wool churches, with a magnificent 15th-century Perpendicular nave and clerestory.

Chippy's most enduring landmark, however, is the arresting **Bliss Mill** (now converted to apartments) on the outskirts of town. This monument to the industrial architecture of the 19th century is more like a stately home

TOP FIVE PUBS FOR SUNDAY LUNCH

- **Crooked Billet** (p240; Stoke Row) Top-notch food, old-world charm and tales of dashing highwaymen.
- **Falkland Arms** (opposite; Great Tew) Real ales, clay pipes and snuff behind the bar; it doesn't get more authentic than this.
- **Plough** (p244; Kingham) Quaint village pub with sublime food and chilled atmosphere.
- **Swan** (p250; Southrop) Sophisticated fare from ex-London foodies at a traditional village inn.
- **Olde Bell** (p239; Hurley) Sophisticated country pub with designer interior and excellent nosh.

than a factory, topped by a domed tower and chimney stack of the Tuscan order.

For overnight accommodation, **Norten's B&B** (☎ 01608-645060; www.nortens.co.uk; 10 New St; s£35-50, d£50-65) offers a range of modern rooms with simple, stylish design. The downstairs cafe (10am to 10pm) serves a good range of Mediterranean food (mains £4 to £7).

Alternatively, make your way 4 miles south-west of town to the pretty village of Kingham, where two fine gastropubs offer stylish rooms and sublime food. Set on the village green, **Plough** (☎ 01608-658327; www.kinghamplough.co.uk; The Green, Kingham; s£65-75 d£75-95; ☑ ☑ wi-fi) has simple, elegant rooms and a short but exquisite menu (mains £12 to £14). Just around the corner is **Tollgate Inn** (☎ 01608-658389; www.thetollgate.com; Church St, Kingham; s/d £60/90), with contemporary but rustic rooms and sophisticated fare.

Stagecoach bus 20 runs between Chippy and Oxford roughly every half-hour.

MORETON-IN-MARSH

pop 3198

Home to some beautiful buildings but utterly ruined by through traffic, Moreton-in-Marsh is a major road hub and useful for its transport links. On Tuesday, the town bursts into life for its weekly market.

Just east of Moreton, **Chastleton House** (NT; ☎ 01608-674355; adult/under 18yr £7/3.50; ☎ 1-5pm Wed-Sat mid-Mar-late-Sep, 1-4pm Wed-Sat Oct) is one of England's finest and most complete Jacobean houses, full of rare tapestries, family portraits and antique furniture. Outside, there's a classic Elizabethan topiary garden and a lovely 12th-century church nearby.

Pulhams Coaches (☎ 01451-820369; www.pulhamscoaches.com) runs seven services between Moreton and Cheltenham (one hour, Monday to Saturday) via Stow-on-the-Wold (15 minutes) and Bourton-on-the-Water (20 minutes). Two Sunday services run from May to September only.

There are trains roughly every 90 minutes to Moreton from London Paddington (£29, 1½ hours) via Oxford (£9.70, 35 minutes) and on to Worcester (£10.60, 45 minutes) and Hereford (£14.30, 1½ hours).

CHIPPING CAMPDEN

pop 1943

An unspoiled gem in an area full of aching pretty villages, Chipping Campden is a glorious reminder of life in the Cotswolds in medi-

eval times. The graceful curving main street is flanked by a wonderful array of wayward stone cottages, fine terraced houses, ancient inns and historic homes, liberally sprinkled with chichi boutiques and upmarket shops. Despite its obvious allure, the town remains relatively unspoiled by tourist crowds and is a wonderful place to visit.

Pop into the helpful **tourist office** (☎ 01386-841206; www.visitchippingcampden.com; High St; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) to pick up a town trail guide for information on the most historic buildings and to get you off the main drag and down some of the gorgeous back streets. If you're visiting on a Wednesday between July and September, it's well worth joining a guided tour (2.30pm, suggested donation £2.50) run by the Cotswold Wardens.

The most obvious sight is the wonderful 17th-century **Market Hall**, with multiple gables and elaborate timber roof. Further on, at the western end of the High St, is the 15th-century **St James's**, one of the Cotswolds' great wool churches. Built in the Perpendicular style, it has a magnificent tower and some graceful 17th-century monuments. Nearby on Church St is a remarkable row of **almshouses** dating from the 17th century, and the Jacobean lodges and gateways of the now-ruined Campden House.

The surviving **Court Barn** (☎ 01386-841951; www.courtbar.org.uk; Church St; adult/under 16yr £3.75/free; ☎ 10.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sat, 11.30am-5.30pm Sun Apr-Sep, 11am-4pm Tue-Sat, 11.30am-4pm Sun Oct-Mar) is now a museum of craft and design featuring work from the Arts and Crafts Movement (see p534). CR Ashbee and the Guild of Handicrafts moved to Chipping Campden in 1902 and a collection of their work is showcased here.

About 4 miles northeast of Chipping Campden, **Hidcote Manor Garden** (NT; ☎ 01386-438333; Hidcote Bartrim; adult/under 18yr £8.50/4.25; ☎ 10am-5pm Sat-Wed mid-Mar-Oct, Fri Jul & Aug) is one of the finest examples of Arts and Crafts landscaping in Britain.

Sleeping & Eating

Manor Farm (☎ 01386-840390; www.manorfarmbnb.demon.co.uk; s/d £55/65) Set in a beautiful 17th-century farmhouse, this lovely B&B has all the period charm of a Cotswold home but with contemporary style and modern facilities. Along with the exposed oak beams and creaking stairs, you'll find king-size beds, power showers and neutral colour schemes.

THE COTSWOLDS OLIMPICKS

The medieval sport of shin-kicking lives on in Chipping Campden, where each year the townspeople gather to compete at the Cotswolds Olimpicks, a traditional country sports day first celebrated in 1612. It is one of the most entertaining and bizarre sporting competitions in England, and many of the original events such as welly wanging (throwing), the sack race and climbing a slippery pole are still held. The competition was mentioned in Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* and has even been officially sanctioned by the British Olympic Association. It is held annually at the beginning of June.

Eight Bells (☎ 01386-840371; www.eightbellsinn.co.uk; Church St; s £55-85, d £85-125) Dripping with old-world character and charm, but also decidedly modern, this 14th-century inn has a range of sleek, comfortable rooms and a well-respected restaurant serving a British and Continental menu (mains £11 to £12) in rustic settings.

our pick **Cotswold House Hotel** (☎ 01386-840330; www.cotswoldhouse.com; The Square; r £150-650; P) If you're after a spot of luxury, look no further than this chic Regency town house turned boutique hotel. Bespoke furniture, massive beds, Frette linens, cashmere throws, private gardens and hot tubs are the norm here. You can dine in style at Juliana's (two/three course set dinner £39.50/49.50) or take a more informal approach at Hick's Brasserie (mains £9 to £18), a slick operation with an ambitious menu.

If you're willing to stay a little out of town, there are two fine options well worth going the extra mile:

Churchill Arms (☎ 01386-594000; www.thechurchillarms.com; Paxford; s/d £40/70) A gastropub with pretty rooms and a menu (mains £10 to £16) that draws crowds from miles around.

Malt House (☎ 01386-840295; www.malt-house.co.uk; Blockley, Broad Campden; s/d £85/135) A charming country guest house set in a stunningly picturesque village.

Getting There & Around

Between them, buses 21 and 22 run almost hourly to Stratford-upon-Avon or Moreton-in-Marsh. Bus 21 also stops in Broadway. There are no Sunday services.

To catch a real glimpse of the countryside, try hiring a bike from **Cotswold Country Cycles** (☎ 01386-438706; www.cotswoldcountrycycles.com; Longlands Farm Cottage; per day £15) and discovering the quiet lanes and gorgeous villages around town.

BROADWAY

pop 2496

This absurdly pretty village has inspired writers, artists and composers in times past with its graceful, golden-hued cottages set at the foot of a steep escarpment. It's a quintessentially English place pitted with antiques shops, tearooms and art galleries, and is justifiably popular in the summer months, but take the time to wander away from the main street and you'll be rewarded with quiet back roads lined with stunning cottages, flower-filled gardens and picturesque churches.

The **tourist office** (☎ 01386-852937; www.beautifulbroadway.com; Russell Sq; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun) is just off the High St.

Beyond the charm of the village itself, there are few specific attractions. If you're feeling energetic, the lovely, 12th-century **Church of St Eadburgha** is a signposted 1-mile walk from town. Near here, a more challenging path leads uphill for 2 miles to **Broadway Tower** (☎ 01386-852390; www.broadwaytower.co.uk; adult/under 14yr £3.80/2.30; ☎ 10.30am-5pm Apr-Oct, 11am-3pm Sat & Sun Nov-Mar), a crenulated, 18th-century Gothic folly on the crest of the escarpment. It has a small William Morris exhibition on one floor and stunning views from the top.

Broadway is littered with chintzy B&Bs, but for something more modern, try **Hadley House** (☎ 01386-853486; www.cotswolds.info/webpage/hadley-house.html; Leamington Rd; s/d £60/70; P) (wi-fi), a cosy B&B with beautiful rooms in soothing pale colours with a splash of deep red.

Alternatively, **Windrush** (☎ 01386 853577; www.broadway-windrush.co.uk; Station Rd; d £80-100; P) is a friendly B&B with newly refurbished rooms decked out in simple neutral colours, with flat-screen TVs, bathrobes and complimentary toiletries.

For food, the **Swan** (☎ 01386-852278; www.theswanbroadway.co.uk; 2 The Green; mains £8-15) is an informal place with stylish, contemporary decor, wooden floors, leather seats and a mouth-watering, modern menu.

Sleek and stylish **Russells** (☎ 01386-853555; www.russellsofbroadway.com; 20 High St; mains £10-21) has upmarket modern British fare. It also has a

selection of slick, modern rooms (£120 to £325) with simple design, flat-screen TVs and lots of little luxuries.

Getting There & Away

Bus 22 goes to Moreton-in-Marsh, Chipping Campden and Stratford (20 minutes, four daily Monday to Saturday) and bus 606 goes to Cheltenham (50 minutes, four Monday to Saturday).

AROUND BROADWAY

About 3 miles south of Broadway is **Snowhill Manor** (NT; ☎ 01386-852410; Snowhill; adult/under 18yr £8.10/4.10, garden only £4.40/2.20; ☹ noon-5pm Wed-Sun mid-Mar-Oct), a wonderful Cotswold mansion once home to the marvellously eccentric Charles Paget Wade. The house contains Wade's extraordinary collection of craftsmanship and design including everything from musical instruments to Victorian perambulators and Japanese armour. Outside, the lovely gardens were designed as an extension of the house, with pools, terraces and wonderful views.

Also worth visiting, nearby, is the stunning Jacobean mansion **Stanway House** (☎ 01386-58469; www.stanwayfountain.co.uk; Stanway; adult/under 14yr £6/4.50, garden only £4/1; ☹ 2-5pm Tue & Thu Jun-Aug, garden only Sat Jun-Aug). Little has changed since it was a family home: it contains much of its original furniture and is surrounded by wonderful, baroque water gardens including the world's highest gravity fountain.

WINCHCOMBE

pop 3682

Winchcombe is a sleepy Cotswold town, very much a working, living place with butchers, bakers and small independent shops giving it a very lived-in, authentic feel. It was capital of the Saxon kingdom of Mercia and one of the most important towns in the Cotswolds until the Middle Ages, and today the remnants of its illustrious past can be seen in the beautiful houses lining the streets, and the picturesque cottages on Vineyard St and Dents Tce and in majestic Sudeley Castle. Winchcombe is also blessed with good accommodation and fine-dining choices, making it a great base for exploring the area.

The helpful **tourist office** (☎ 01242-602925; www.winchcombe.co.uk; High St; ☹ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun Apr-Oct, to 4pm Sat & Sun Nov-Mar) can help plan an itinerary.

When wandering around town, look out for the fine gargoyles that adorn the lovely St Peter's Church. Just outside the town are the evocative ruins of Cistercian **Hailes Abbey** (EH; ☎ 01242-602398; adult/under 15yr £3.50/1.80; ☹ 10am-5pm Easter-Oct), once one of the country's main pilgrimage centres.

The town's main attraction is magnificent **Sudeley Castle** (☎ 01242-602308; www.sudeleycastle.co.uk; adult/under 15yr £7.20/4.20; ☹ 10.30am-5pm Sun-Thu mid-March-Oct), once a favoured retreat of Tudor and Stuart monarchs. The house is still used as a family home, and much of the interior is off limits to visitors, but you can get a glimpse of its grand proportions while visiting the exhibitions of costumes, memorabilia and paintings and the surrounding gardens. If you want an insight into real life in the castle, join one of the 'Connoisseur Tours' (£15, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday 11am, 1pm and 3pm, mid-March to October).

If you're feeling energetic, there's easy access to the Cotswold Way from Winchcombe, and the 2½-mile hike to Belas Knap is one of the most scenic short walks in the region. Five-thousand-year-old Belas Knap is the best-preserved neolithic burial chamber in the country and, although visitors are not allowed inside, the views down to Sudeley Castle and across the surrounding countryside are breathtaking.

Sleeping & Eating

White Hart Inn (☎ 01242-602359; www.the-white-hart-inn.com; r £40-115) An excellent option in the centre of town. Choose the cheaper 'rambler' rooms with shared bathrooms or go for more luxury in a superior room. You'll also get a good choice of food in the bar (mains £7 to £8) and modern British fare in the main restaurant (mains £10.50 to £19.50).

Parks Farm (☎ 01242-603874; www.parksfarm.co.uk; Sudeley; d £50-60; ☹) Stay on a 17th-century Cotswold hill farm just outside the town for an insight into local life. This friendly B&B has two cosy rooms with views over the rolling hills, and guests are served breakfast in a beamed kitchen with one large table and a roaring Aga.

our pick **5 North St** (☎ 01242-604566; 5 North St; 2/3-course lunch £20.50/24.50, 3-course dinner £33-43; ☹ lunch Wed-Sat, dinner Tue-Sun) The top spot to eat for miles around, this Michelin-starred restaurant has no airs and graces, just beautifully prepared food in down-to-earth surround-

ings. Deep-red walls, wooden tables and friendly service make it a very unpretentious place, but the food is thoroughly ambitious with a keen mix of British ingredients and French flair.

Getting There & Away

Bus 606 runs from Broadway (65 minutes, four daily Monday to Saturday) to Cheltenham via Winchcombe.

STOW-ON-THE-WOLD

pop 2074

A popular stop on a tour of the Cotswolds, Stow is anchored by a large market square surrounded by handsome buildings and steep-walled alleyways, originally used to funnel the sheep into the fair. The town has long held a strategic place in Cotswold history, standing as it does on the Roman Fosse Way and at the junction of six roads. Today, it's littered with antique shops, boutiques, tearooms and delis, thronging with people from passing coach tours. On a quiet day, it's a wonderful place, but all a little artificial if you're looking for true Cotswold charm.

The **tourist office** (☎ 01451-831082; Hollis House; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) on Market Sq sells discounted tickets to local attractions.

Sleeping & Eating

Stow-on-the-Wold YHA (☎ 0845 371 9540; www.yha.org.uk; The Square; dm £15.95; (P) (Q)) Slap bang on the market square, this hostel is in a wonderful 16th-century town house and has small dorms, a children's play area and a warm welcome for families.

Number 9 (☎ 01451-870333; www.number-nine.info; 9 Park St; s £45-50, d £65-75) Centrally located and wonderfully atmospheric, this beautiful B&B has three simple, chic rooms with plenty of space, brand-new bathrooms and subtle decor.

Grapevine Hotel (☎ 01451-830344; www.vines.co.uk; Sheep St; s £85-95, d £140-160) Set in a charming 17th-century building, the grapevine has a range of elegant, classically furnished rooms with exposed stone walls and beams. It also has a choice of three restaurants offering everything from bar food, pizza and pasta to fine dining.

Eagle & Child (☎ 01451-830670; Digbeth St; mains £10-16) Although the atmosphere is decidedly medieval with exposed beams and old-world charm, the menu is modern

with traditional English favourites given a contemporary twist.

Old Butchers (☎ 01451-831700; www.theoldbutchers.com; 7 Park St; mains £12-17) Simple, smart and sophisticated, this is Stow's top spot for dining, serving robust, local ingredients whipped up into sublime dishes. For all its fanfare, there's little pretension here, just fine modern British cuisine with more than a hint of Continental European influence thrown in.

Getting There & Away

Bus 55 links Stow with Moreton, Bourton, Northleach and Cirencester (eight daily Monday to Saturday). Bus 801 runs to Cheltenham, Moreton and Bourton (four daily Monday to Friday, nine on Saturday).

The nearest train stations are 4 miles away at Kingham and Moreton-in-Marsh.

BOURTON-ON-THE-WATER

pop 3093

An undeniably picturesque town, Bourton has sold its soul to tourism, becoming a Cotswolds theme park with its handsome houses and pretty bridges overshadowed by a series of crass, commercial attractions. Take your pick from the model railway and village, bird-conservation project, perfume factory, maze and motor museum, or visit in the winter when the village's understated charm is free to reveal itself.

One occasion worth battling the crowds for is the annual **water football match**, held in the river on the August Bank Holiday Monday. This traditional frolic dates back to the 1800s.

If you'd like to stay chic and stylish, **Dial House** (☎ 01451-822244; www.dialhousehotel.com; The Chestnuts; r £110-230) is unpretentious but seriously luxurious, with hand-painted wallpaper, giant beds, silky throws and a wonderful mix of period charm and designer style. The restaurant (mains £10 to £23) serves up excellent modern British cuisine.

Bus 801 operates to Cheltenham, Moreton and Stow (up to four daily Monday to Friday, nine Saturday).

THE SLAUGHTERS

pop 400

An antidote to the commercialism of Bourton, the picture-postcard villages of Upper and Lower Slaughter still attract the crowds of tourists, yet manage to maintain

THROW AWAY YOUR GUIDEBOOK!

As wonderful as the Cotswolds villages may be, in the summer months they can be a nightmare of camera-wielding crowds, slow-moving pensioners and chaotic coach parking. However, most tourists stick to a well-trodden path, so it's easy to get away from the crowds and discover the rarely visited villages lurking in the hills. Stick to the B-roads and visit places like **Guiting Power** near Bourton, **Broadwell**, **Maugersbury**, **Adlestrop** and the **Swells** near Stow, **Sheepscombe** and **Slad** near Painswick, **Blockley** near Chipping Campden, **Great Tew** near Chipping Norton, **Taynton**, **Sherborne** and the **Barringtons** near Burford, **Ampney St Mary** and **Ampney Crucis** near Cirencester, or **Coln St Aldwyns** and **Hatherop** near Bibury. Or better still, see the region on foot or by bike and just meander at your own pace, or join a walking tour with **Cotswold Walking Holidays** (☎ 01242-518888; www.cotswoldwalks.com) or a bike tour with **Cotswold Country Cycles** (☎ 01386-438706; www.cotswoldcountrycycles.com).

their unhurried medieval charm. The village names are derived from the Old English 'sloughtre', meaning slough or muddy place, but today the River Eye is contained within limestone banks and meanders peacefully through the village past the 17th-century Lower Slaughter Manor (now a top-notch hotel) to the **old mill** (☎ 01451-820052; www.oldmill-lowerslaughter.com; admission £2; ☎ 10am-6pm Mar-Oct) which houses a small museum and tearoom.

To see the Slaughters at their best, arrive on foot from Bourton (a 1-mile walk) across the fields. From here you can continue for another mile across the fields to Upper Slaughter, with its own fine manor house and glorious cottages.

NORTHLEACH

pop 1923

Little visited and under appreciated, Northleach is a lovely little market town of half-timbered Tudor houses, imposing merchants' stores and late-medieval cottages. There's a wonderful mix of architectural styles clustered around the market square and the narrow laneways leading off it, but the highlight is the **Church of St Peter and St Paul**, a masterpiece of Cotswold Perpendicular style. The large traceried stained-glass windows and collection of memorial brasses are unrivalled in the region.

Near the square is Oak House, a 17th-century wool house that contains **Keith Harding's World of Mechanical Music** (☎ 01451-860181; www.mechanicalmusic.co.uk; adult/child £7.50/3; ☎ 10am-6pm), a fascinating museum of self-playing musical instruments, where you can hear Rachmaninoff's works played on a reproducing piano.

Just outside town is **Chedworth Roman Villa** (NT; ☎ 01242-890256; Yanworth; adult/under 18yr £5.70/3.35; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Mar-Nov), one of the largest Roman villas in England. Built as a stately home in about AD 120, it contains some wonderful mosaics illustrating the seasons, bathhouses, and, a short walk away, a temple by the River Coln. It's 3 miles northwest of Fossebridge off the A429.

For overnight stays, try the **Wheatshaf** (☎ 01451-860244; www.wheatshaf.cotswoldinns.com; West End; d £85-145; ☎ wi-fi). It has eight en suite rooms that have recently been refurbished. The restaurant serves a good selection of light lunches (£6 to £8) and a modern British dinner menu (mains £11 to £18).

Getting There & Away

Swanbrook runs six buses Monday to Saturday between Cheltenham (30 minutes) and Northleach, and three to Oxford (one hour).

CIRENCESTER

pop 15,861

Refreshingly unpretentious, with narrow, winding streets and graceful town houses, charming Cirencester is an affluent, elegant kind of place. The lovely market square is surrounded by wonderful 18th-century and Victorian architecture, and the nearby streets showcase a harmonious medley of buildings from various eras.

Under the Romans, Cirencester was second only to London in terms of size and importance and, although little of this period remains, you can still see the grassed-over ruins of one of the largest amphitheatres in the country. The medieval wool trade was also good to the town, with wealthy merchants funding the building of a superb church.

Today, Cirencester is the most important town in the southern Cotswolds and retains an authentic, unaffected air, with the lively Monday and Friday markets as important as the expensive boutiques and trendy delis that line its narrow streets.

The **tourist office** (☎ 01285-654180; Park St; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun) is located in the museum and has a leaflet detailing a guided walk around the town and its historic buildings.

Church of St John the Baptist

Standing elegantly on the Market Sq, the cathedral-like **St John's** (suggested donation £3; ☎ 10am-5pm) is one of England's largest parish churches. An outstanding Perpendicular-style tower with wild flying buttresses dominates the exterior, but it is the majestic three-storey south porch that is the real highlight. Built as an office by late-15th-century abbots, it subsequently became the medieval town hall.

Soaring arches, magnificent fan vaulting and a Tudor nave adorn the light-filled interior, where you'll also find a 15th-century, painted stone pulpit and memorial brasses recording the matrimonial histories of important wool merchants. The east window contains fine medieval stained glass, and a wall safe displays the **Boleyn Cup**, made for Anne Boleyn, second wife of Henry VIII, in 1535.

Corinium Museum

Modern design, innovative displays and computer reconstructions bring one of Britain's largest collections of Roman artefacts to life at the **Corinium Museum** (☎ 01285-655611; www.cotswolds.gov.uk/museum; Park St; adult/under 16yr £3.95/2; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun). You can dress as a Roman soldier, meet an Anglo-Saxon princess and discover what Cirencester was like during its heyday as a wealthy medieval wool town. Highlights of the Roman collection include the beautiful Hunting Dogs and Four Seasons floor mosaics, and a reconstructed Roman kitchen and butcher's shop.

Other Sights

Set in a beautifully converted Victorian brewery, the **Brewery Arts Centre** (☎ 01285-657181; www.breweryarts.org.uk; Brewery Ct; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) is home to 12 resident craft workers and hosts regular exhibitions, workshops and classes.

Also worth visiting is **Cirencester Park** (Cecily Hill; ☎ 8am-5pm), the baroque landscaped grounds of the Bathurst Estate. The park features magnificent geometrical landscaping and has a lovely short walk along Broad Ride.

The remains of the **Roman amphitheatre** are on Cotswold Ave.

Sleeping & Eating

Old Brewhouse (☎ 01285-656099; www.theoldbrewhouse.com; 7 London Rd; s £50-55, d £65-70; (P)) Set in a charming 17th-century town house, this lovely B&B has bright, pretty rooms with cast-iron beds and subtle, country-style florals or patchwork quilts. The beautiful garden room even has its own patio.

Corinium Hotel (☎ 01285-659711; www.coriniumhotel.com; 21 Gloucester St; s £55-70, d £74-109; (P)) This Elizabethan wool merchant's house is now a family-run hotel with 15 rooms ranging from simple doubles to four-posters with exposed beams and corner baths. The understated decor, subtle colour schemes and mix of period features make it a good bet.

No 12 (☎ 01285-640232; www.no12cirencester.co.uk; 12 Park St; d £85) This Georgian town house right in the centre of town has gloriously unfussy rooms kitted out with a tasteful mix of antiques and modern furnishings. Think feather pillows, merino blankets, extra-long beds, slick modern bathrooms and a host of little extras to make you smile.

Piazza Fontana (☎ 01285-643133; 30A Castle St; mains £9-17; closed Sun) An authentic family-run Italian joint hidden away in a courtyard, serving up a great selection of traditional pastas, meat and fish dishes just done to perfection. It's well worth seeking out for its informal atmosphere and top-notch service.


Jesse's Bistro (☎ 01285-641497; Blackjack St; mains £12.50-21.50; ☎ lunch Mon-Sat & dinner Tue-Sat) Hidden away in a cobbled stable yard with its own fishmonger and cheese shop, Jesse's is a great little place with flagstone floors, wrought-iron chairs and mosaic tables. The modern menu features a selection of great dishes, but the real treat is the fresh fish and meat cooked in the wood-burning oven.

Getting There & Away



National Express buses run roughly hourly from Cirencester to London (£17, 2½ hours) and to Cheltenham Spa (30 minutes) and Gloucester (one hour). Stagecoach bus 51 also runs to Cheltenham Monday to Saturday (40

THE GOOD LIFE



The Cotswolds' mellow charms attract moneyed city folk, A-list celebrities and wealthy downsizers in equal measure, but mere mortals can get a slice of the good life at one of the numerous luxury hotels in the area. Here are just a few to whet your fancy.



LYGON ARMS (☎ 01386-852255; www.barcelo-hotels.co.uk/lygonarms; High St, Broadway; d £99-209;  ) Choose medieval splendour or modern chic at this 16th-century inn in the heart of Broadway.

COTSWOLDS 88 (☎ 01452-813688; www.cotswolds88hotel.com; Painswick; d £170-450) Quirky, ostentatious and opulently designed, this latest arrival to the Cotswolds uber-hotel club aims to be rock 'n' roll cool and has the tragically hip attitude to go with it.

LORDS OF THE MANOR (☎ 01451-820243; www.lordsofthemanor.com; Upper Slaughter; d £195-370;  )

A former rectory just dripping in character, this place has a genteel air with lavishly elegant rooms and the foresight to leave a pristine pair of wellies at your door just in case you'd like to explore the gardens.

COWLEY MANOR (☎ 01242-87900; www.cowleymanor.com; Cowley; d £245-470;  ) Handmade furniture and fabrics by young British designers adorn the simple, but elegant, rooms at this super-slinky hotel.

BARNSELY HOUSE (☎ 01285-740000; www.barnsleyhouse.com; Barnsley; d £295-525;  ) For funky chic and indulgent sophistication, this hideout for the rich and famous is just the spot for a romantic weekend.

minutes, hourly). Bus 852 goes to Gloucester (four daily Monday to Saturday).

BIBURY

pop 623

Once described by William Morris as 'the most beautiful village in England', Bibury is another Cotswold gem with a cluster of gorgeous riverside cottages and tangle of narrow streets flanked by wayward stone buildings. It's an impossibly quaint place whose main attraction is **Arlington Row**, a stunning sweep of cottages now thought to be the most photographed street in Britain. Originally built as a sheep house in the 14th century, the building was converted into weavers' cottages in the 17th century. Also worth a look is the 17th-century **Arlington Mill**, just a short stroll away across Rack Isle, a wildlife refuge once used to dry cloth.

Few visitors make it past these two sights, but for a glimpse of the real Bibury, venture into the village proper behind Arlington Row, where you'll find a cluster of stunning cottages and the Saxon **Church of St Mary**. Although much altered since its original construction, many 8th-century features are still visible among the 12th- and 13th-century additions.

Despite its popularity Bibury, is seriously lacking in decent accommodation. The best place to stay is in the nearby village of Coln, where the jasmine-clad **New Inn** (☎ 01285-750651; www.new-inn.co.uk; Coln-St-Aldwyns; d £120-180) offers


contemporary rooms in 16th-century surroundings. It's also the best bet in the area for food with its modern British menu (mains £9 to £15) served in the main restaurant, bar and gorgeous garden.


Buses 860, 863, 865, 866 and 869 pass through Bibury en route to Cirencester at least once daily from Monday to Saturday (20 minutes).

LECHLADE-ON-THAMES

pop 2415

A quiet backwater dominated by the graceful spire of St Lawrence's Church, the attractive market town of Lechlade is temptingly close to two wonderful period houses.

Just 3 miles east, signposted off the A417, is the gorgeous Tudor pile **Kelmscott Manor** (☎ 01367-252486; www.kelmscottmanor.co.uk; adult/under 16yr £8.50/4.25, garden only £2;  house & garden 11am-5pm Wed Apr-Sep & selected Sat in summer, garden only 2-5pm Thu Jun-Sep), once the summer home of William Morris, the poet, artist and founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement (p534). The house contains many of Morris' personal effects, as well as fabrics and furniture designed by him and his associates.

Another worthwhile trip from Lechlade is **Buscot Park** (NT; ☎ 01367-240786; www.buscot-park.com; adult/child £7.50/3.75, grounds only £5/2.50;  2-6pm Wed-Fri, grounds only Mon & Tue Apr-Sep & selected weekends), an ornate, Italianate country house set in gardens designed by Harold Peto. The house is now

SOMETHING FOR THE WEEKEND

Kick-start your weekend by checking into the seductively stylish **Cotswold House Hotel** (p245) in Chipping Campden, and take a sunset stroll around the village before dining at Juliana's or Hick's Brasserie. First thing the following morning, blow away the cobwebs with a short stroll and magnificent views at **Broadway Tower** (p245) and then head south to **Winchcombe** (p246), where you can loll about the lovely village or take in some history at the Tudor pile **Sudeley Castle** (p246).

Stop for lunch at the seriously unpretentious but exceptionally good **5 North St** (p246), before taking the cross-country route to stunning **Lower Slaughter** (p247). If you're feeling sprightly, follow the trail over the rolling hills to Upper Slaughter, or just sit and feed the ducks before swinging back to Bourton to check into the sumptuous **Dial House** (p247) for an evening of luxury and fine food.

On Sunday, head east to **Woodstock** to ramble the grounds or the stately rooms of **Blenheim Palace** (p236), and work up an appetite for a hearty traditional lunch at the glorious thatched **Falkland Arms** (see boxed text, p242) in Great Tew.

home to the Faringdon art collection, which includes paintings by Rembrandt, Reynolds, Rubens, Van Dyck and Murillo. The house is 2¾ miles southeast of Lechlade on the Faringdon road (A417).

If you're visiting either attraction, it's well worth making a detour to the pretty village of Southrop, 4 miles northwest of Lechlade, to dine at the atmospheric pub **Swan** (☎ 01367-850205; www.theswanatsouthrop.co.uk; mains £11-15; ☹ closed Sun dinner). This 17th-century inn has the stone floors and exposed beams you'd expect, but is refreshingly bright and uncluttered and serves extremely sophisticated food at reasonable prices.

Bus 877 runs from Lechlade to Cirencester (40 minutes, three times daily from Monday to Saturday).

TETBURY

pop 5250

Once a prosperous wool-trading centre, Tetbury has managed to preserve most of its architectural heritage – its busy streets are lined with medieval cottages, sturdy old town houses and Georgian Gothic gems. It's an unspoilt place with a rather regal character: even HRH Prince Charles has a shop here – Highgrove – though it's unlikely you'll find him serving behind the counter.

Along with goodies from the Highgrove Estate, Tetbury is a great place for antique fans with a shop of old curios on almost every corner. You'll also find plenty of chichi boutiques and interior-design shops, but they're tempered by the bakers, butchers and delis that ground the town and give it a sense of real identity.

As you wander round, look out for the row of gorgeous medieval weavers' cottages that line the steep hill at **Chipping Steps**, leading up to the **Chipping** (market), which is surrounded by graceful 17th- and 18th-century town houses. From here, it's a short stroll to Market Sq, where the 17th-century **Market House** stands as if on stilts. Close by, the Georgian Gothic **Church of St Mary the Virgin** has a towering spire and wonderful interior.

Just south of Tetbury is the **National Arboretum** (☎ 01666-880220; www.forestry.gov.uk/westonbirt; adult £5-8, under 18yr £2; ☹ 9am-dusk) at Westonbirt. The park boasts a magnificent selection of temperate trees, with some wonderful walks and great colour throughout the year, especially in autumn.

The friendly **tourist office** (☎ 01666-503552; www.visittetbury.co.uk; 33 Church St; ☹ 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat Mar-Oct, to 2.30pm Nov-Feb) has plenty of information on the town and its history and stocks a trail guide to the arboretum.

Sleeping & Eating

Ormond's Head (☎ 01666-505690; www.theormond.co.uk; 23 Long St; s £59-99, d £69-140; (P)) This modern hotel has a range of individually styled rooms with subtle, but striking, fabrics and funky wall-papers. It's an unassuming place that offers excellent value for money. Expect duck-down duvets, flat-screen TVs, a DVD library and warm welcome for families. The modern bar and grill downstairs serve excellent-value food (mains £9 to £15).

Talboys House (☎ 01666-503597; www.talboyshouse.com; 17 Church Street; s £45, d £95-120) Grab a slice of India in this quirky joint with exotic rooms

decked out in Bollywood style. This 19th-century wool merchant's house is now a haven of sultry colour schemes, embroidered fabrics, carved woods and Indian toiletries.

Chef's Table (☎ 01666-504466; 49 Long St; bistro mains £8-13; ☎ 9.30am-3.30pm) This fantastic deli and bistro is the place to go to stock up for a picnic in the Arboretum or a mouth-watering lunch of local organic ingredients rustled up into stunning rustic dishes – go for rabbit and tarragon pie or shellfish and saffron chowder. If you're feeling inspired, you can learn how to cook the dishes under the guidance of Michelin-starred chef Michael Bedford – his cookery school runs on selected days during the summer months (day course £120).

Blue Zucchini (☎ 01666-505852; 7-9 Church St; dinner mains £10-14; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun & Mon) This popular cafe and bistro is a bright, cheery place that's usually buzzing. It's great for a coffee and a look at the papers and serves a good selection of contemporary classics for lunch and dinner.

Getting There & Away

Bus 29 runs between Tetbury and Stroud (30 minutes, six daily Monday to Saturday). Bus 620 goes to Bath (1¼ hours, six daily Monday to Friday, four on Saturday), stopping at Westonbirt Arboretum en route.

ULEY

pop 1100

This lovely little hamlet, with its quaint village green and jumble of pretty houses, sits below the overgrown remains of the largest Iron Age hill fort in England, **Uley Bury**. Dating from about 300 BC, the fort and its 2-mile perimeter walk provide spectacular views over the Severn Vale. To walk there, follow the steep path that runs from the village church. If you're driving, access to the car park is off the B4066, north of the village.

Just east of Uley you'll find the wonderfully romantic **Owlpen Manor** (☎ 01453-860261; www.owlpen.com; adult/under 14yr £5.50/2.50; ☎ 2-5pm Tue, Thu & Sun May-Oct), a Tudor mansion nestled in a wooded valley and surrounded by formal terraced gardens. The house was built between 1450 and 1616 and has a magnificent Tudor **Great Hall**, which contains unique painted wall hangings. Owlpen suffered 100 years of neglect in the 19th century and was rescued and partially refurbished in 1926 by architect Norman Jewson, a follower of

William Morris. The house now contains a rich collection of Arts and Crafts (see p534) furniture and fittings.

Virtually untouched since the mid-1870s, **Woodchester Mansion** (☎ 01453-861541; www.woodchester mansion.org.uk; adult/under 14yr £5.50/free; ☎ 11am-4pm Sun Easter-Oct plus Sat Jul & Aug) is an incredible place, abandoned before it was finished, yet amazingly grand and graceful. Doors lead nowhere, fireplaces are stuck halfway up walls, and corridors end at ledges with views of the ground below. The house also features an impressive set of gruesome gargoyles and is home to a large colony of bats and several resident ghosts. It's a mile north of Uley on the B4066; bus 20 runs between Uley and Stroud (55 minutes, hourly Monday to Saturday).

BERKELEY

pop 1865

An astounding relic from medieval times, **Berkeley Castle** (☎ 01453-810332; www.berkeley-castle.com; adult/under 16yr £7.50/4.50, grounds only £4/2; ☎ 11am-5.30pm Sun late Mar-late Oct, daily Jul & Aug) has remained virtually untouched since it was built as a sturdy fortress in Norman times. Edward II was imprisoned and then murdered here on the order of his wife, Queen Isabella, and her lover in 1327, and you can still see the King's Gallery with its cell and dungeon. You can also visit the castle's **state rooms**, as well as the medieval **Great Hall**, **Picture Gallery** and **kitchen**. Regular jousting events and medieval banquets are held here in summer.

Berkeley is also home to the **Jenner Museum** (☎ 01453-810631; www.jennermuseum.com; Church Lane; adult/under 18yr £4.25/2.50; ☎ 12.30-5.30pm Tue-Sat, 1-5.30pm Sun Apr-Oct), which honours the life and works of Edward Jenner, country doctor and pioneer of vaccination. The museum is in the beautiful Queen Anne house, where the doctor performed the first smallpox vaccination in 1796. To get to the museum on foot, follow the path from the castle through **St Mary's churchyard**.

Bus 207 does the route between Berkeley and Gloucester (40 minutes, daily Monday to Saturday).

STROUD

pop 32,052

Stroud once hummed with the sound of industry, with over 150 cloth mills operating around the town, but when the bottom fell out of the market it fell heavily into decline, and

is only today recovering from the downturn in its fortunes. Although only a handful of the handsome old mills are still operating, many others have been converted into apartments or offices and the pleasant town has become a Bohemian enclave littered with fair-trade and wholefood shops, delis and organic cafes. The picturesque Shambles still holds a market three times weekly and the Tudor town hall is also worth a look.

In the centre of town, the imposing Subscription Rooms are home to the **tourist office** (☎ 01453-760960; George St; ☹ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), which can help with information for visiting mills in the area.

The main attraction is the diverting **Museum in the Park** (☎ 01453-763394; www.stroud.gov.uk/museum; Stratford Pk; admission free; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Tue-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat & Sun Oct-Mar), set in an 18th-century mansion surrounded by parkland. The museum tells the history of the town and its cloth-making, and there are displays of everything from dinosaurs to Victorian toys and the world's first lawnmower.

For food, head for **Star Anise** (☎ 01453-761938; Gloucester St; mains £6-8; ☹ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2.30pm Sun), a vegetarian arts cafe serving good, fresh local produce, and a popular spot for Sunday brunch. It's also open for dinner (mains £9 to £11) on Saturday nights and often features live music.

Another good bet is **Woodruffs Organic Cafe** (☎ 01453-759195; 24 High St; mains £5-8; ☹ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat), a small, cheerful place with a wholesome selection of salads, soups and stews.

The nicest place to stay is in nearby Nalisworth at the 16th-century **Egypt Mill** (☎ 01453-833449; www.egyptmill.com; s £80-95, d £90-110; (P)), where you can fall asleep to the sound of the gurgling weir. The rooms vary quite a bit and it's definitely worth paying the extra tenner for a superior option.

Bus 46 runs hourly to Painswick (10 minutes) and Cheltenham (30 minutes), while bud 93 runs roughly hourly to Gloucester (25 minutes), both from Monday to Saturday. Trains run roughly hourly to London (£38, 1½ hours), Gloucester (£4.50, 20 minutes) and Cheltenham (£6.40, 40 minutes).

PAINSWICK

pop 1666

One of the most beautiful and unspoilt towns in the Cotswolds, hilltop Painswick is an ab-

solute gem. Largely untouched since medieval times, totally unassuming and gloriously uncommercial, it's like gaining access to an outdoor museum that is strangely lost in time. Despite its obvious charms, Painswick sees only a trickle of visitors, so you can wander the narrow winding streets and admire the picture-perfect cottages, handsome stone town houses and medieval inns in your own good time.

The village centres on **St Mary's Church**, a fine, Perpendicular wool church surrounded by table-top tombs and 99 clipped yew trees. Legend has it that, should the hundredth yew tree be allowed to grow, the devil would appear and shrivel it. They planted it anyway – to celebrate the millennium – but there's been no sign of the Wicked One.

Sliding downhill beside and behind the church is a series of gorgeous streetscapes. Look out for **Bisley St**, the original main drag, which was superseded by the now ancient-looking New St in medieval times. Just south of the church, rare **iron stocks** stand in the street.

If you're visiting in late May, enquire about the **Coopers Hill cheese-rolling competition** (www.cheese-rolling.co.uk), held in the nearby village of Cranham. A 200-year-old tradition sees locals running, tumbling and sliding down a local hill in pursuit of a seven-pound block of Double Gloucester cheese. For the truly committed, there is also an uphill competition.

Painswick Rococo Garden

Just a mile north of town, the ostentatious **Painswick Rococo Garden** (☎ 01452-813204; www.rococogarden.co.uk; adult/under 16yr £5.50/2.75; ☹ 11am-5pm Jan-Oct) is the area's biggest attraction. These flamboyant pleasure gardens were designed by Benjamin Hyett in the 1740s and have now been restored to their former glory. Winding paths soften the otherwise strict geometrical precision, bringing visitors around the central vegetable garden to the many Gothic follies dotted in the grounds. There's also a children's nature trail and maze.

Sleeping & Eating

St Michaels (☎ 01452-814555; www.stmichaelsrestaurant.co.uk; Victoria St; d £80, 2/3-course dinner £28/32.50; ☹ lunch & dinner Wed-Sat, dinner Sun; ☑) The three rooms at St Michaels are a handsome mix of luxurious fabrics, exposed stone work, rustic furniture and carved woods. Each is individual in style

and features flat-screen TVs, fresh-cut flowers and a sense of tranquil calm. The restaurant downstairs serves modern British and European cuisine with a touch of Asian and Czech influence.

Cardynham House (☎ 01452-814006; www.cardynham.co.uk; The Cross; s £65-85 d £80-185) The rooms at 15th-century Cardynham House offer four-poster beds, heavy-patterned fabrics and buckets of character. Choose the Shaker-style New England room, the opulent Arabian Nights room, the chintzy Old Tuscany room or for a private pool and garden, the Pool Room. Downstairs, the Bistro (mains £11.50-16.50; lunch Tuesday to Sunday, dinner Tuesday to Saturday) serves modern British cuisine.

For a light lunch or evening meal, the **Royal Oak Inn** (☎ 01452-813129; St Mary's St; mains £8-12) and the **Falcon Inn** (☎ 01452-814222; New St; mains £9-13) both do decent, if fairly standard, grub.

Getting There & Around

Bus 46 connects Cheltenham (30 minutes) and Stroud (10 minutes) with Painswick hourly Monday to Saturday. Bus 256 connects Painswick to Gloucester twice daily on Wednesday and Saturday.

GLOUCESTERSHIRE

After the crowds and coaches of the Cotswolds, Gloucestershire's languid charms are hard to beat, with its host of mellow stone villages and rustic allure. The county's greatest asset, however, is the elegant Regency town of Cheltenham, with its graceful, tree-lined terraces of pristine period houses, its upmarket boutiques and its tempting collection of accommodation and dining options.

The county capital, Gloucester, seems a dowdy cousin by comparison, but is well worth a visit for a glimpse of its magnificent Gothic cathedral. To the north, Tudor Tewkesbury follows the ecclesiastical splendour with a gracious Norman abbey surrounded by a town full of crooked, half-timbered houses. To the west, the picturesque Forest of Dean is a leafy backwater perfect for cycling and walking.

Information

Much of Gloucestershire falls into the Cotswold district. Information on sights, activities, accommodation and transport can be found on www.glos-cotswolds.com.

Activities

Gloucestershire's quiet roads, gentle gradients and numerous footpaths are ideal for walking and cycling. Tourist offices can help with route planning and they stock numerous guides to the trails.

Compass Holidays (☎ 01242-250642; www.compass-holidays.com; bikes per day/week from £12/52) hires bikes and also offers a bag-drop service along the Cotswold Way (£8 per bag per day, minimum two bags) as well as guided cycling tours of the area.

Getting Around

A host of companies operate bus services in Gloucestershire. Most tourist offices stock local bus timetables or can help with finding connecting services. As always, **Traveline** (☎ 0871 200 22 33; www.traveline.org.uk) has details of all routes.

CHELTENHAM

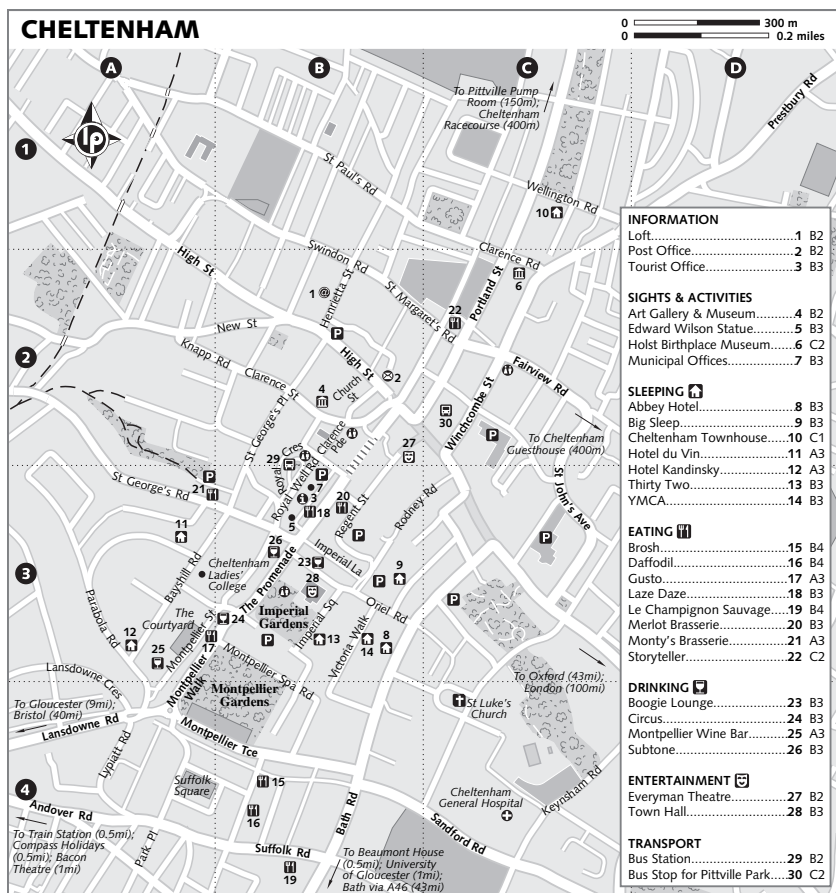
pop 98,875

The shining star of the region, Cheltenham is a historic but cosmopolitan hub at the western edge of the rustic Cotswolds. The city oozes an air of gracious refinement, its streetscapes largely left intact since its heyday as a spa resort in the 18th century. At the time, it rivalled Bath as the place for the sick, hypochondriac and merely moneyed to go, and today it is still riddled with historic buildings, beautifully proportioned terraces and manicured squares.

Cheltenham is an affluent kind of place, its well-heeled residents attracted by the genteel architecture, leafy crescents, wrought-iron balconies and expansive parks – all of which are kept in pristine condition. Bolt on a slew of festivals of all persuasions and a host of fine hotels, restaurants and shops, and it's easy to come to the conclusion that it's the perfect base to explore the region.

History

Cheltenham languished in relative obscurity, until pigeons were seen eating and thriving on salt crystals from a local spring in the early 18th century. It wasn't long before a pump was bored and Cheltenham began to establish itself as a spa town. Along with the sick, property speculators arrived in droves and the town started to grow dramatically. Graceful terraced housing was thrown up, parks were laid out and the rich and famous followed.



By the time George III visited in 1788, the town's fate had been sealed and Cheltenham became the most fashionable holiday destination for England's upper crust. Handel, Samuel Johnson and Jane Austen all came here, and by the mid-19th century, the Victorian neo-Gothic Cheltenham College had sprung up, and, soon after, the genteel Cheltenham Ladies' College.

The town retained its period glamour and allure, and in the 20th century became known as the 'Anglo-Indian's Paradise' as so many Empire-serving, ex-military men retired here. Today, Cheltenham is the most complete Regency town in England, with millions being spent propping up the quick-buck buildings that the Regency entrepreneurs rushed to erect.

Orientation

Central Cheltenham is fairly compact and easy to get around on foot. High St runs roughly east-west; to its south is the Promenade, a more elegant shopping area, which extends into Montpellier, the town's most exclusive area. Pittville Park and the old Pump Room are a mile or so north of High St.

The bus station is behind the Promenade in the town centre, but the train station is out on a limb to the west; bus D runs to the town centre every 10 minutes.

Information

You'll find all the major banks and the main post office (☎ 0845 722 3344; 225-227 High St) on High St.

The **tourist office** (☎ 01242-522878; www.visitcheltenham.info; 77 The Promenade; ☎ 9.30am-5.15pm Mon-Sat, from 10am Wed) runs a free accommodation-booking service, sells event tickets and stocks copies of walking, cycling and driving guides to the Cotswolds.

For internet access, try the **Loft** (☎ 01242-539573; 8-9 Henrietta St; per hr £4; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Thu, to 6pm Fri & Sat, noon-5pm Sun).

Sights

THE PROMENADE & MONTELLIER

Famed as one of England's most beautiful streetscapes, the **Promenade** is a wide, tree-lined boulevard flanked by imposing period buildings. The **Municipal Offices**, built as private residences in 1825, are among the most striking on this street and they face a **statue of Edward Wilson** (1872-1912), a local man who joined Captain Scott's ill-fated second expedition to the South Pole.

Continuing on from here, you'll pass the grandiose **Imperial Gardens**, built to service the Imperial Spa (now the Queens Hotel), en route to **Montpellier**, Cheltenham's most fashionable district. Along with the handsome architecture of the area, there's a buzzing collection of bars, restaurants and boutiques. Along Montpellier Walk, **caryatids** (draped female figures based on those on the Acropolis in Athens) act as structural supports between the shops, each balancing an elaborately carved cornice on its head.

PITTVILLE PUMP ROOM

Built in 1830 as a centrepiece to a vast estate, the **Pittville Pump Room** (☎ 01242-227979; www.pittvillepumproom.org.uk; Pittville Park; admission free; ☎ 10am-4pm Wed-Mon) is Cheltenham's finest Regency building. Originally used as a spa and social centre, it is now used as a concert hall. You can wander into the main auditorium and sample the pungent spa waters, or just explore the vast parklands and lake it overlooks.

ART GALLERY & MUSEUM

Cheltenham's excellent **Art Gallery & Museum** (☎ 01242-237431; www.cheltenham.artgallery.museum; Clarence St; admission free; ☎ 10am-5.20pm Mon-Sat) is well worth a visit for its depiction of Cheltenham life through the ages. It also has wonderful displays on William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement (p534), as well as Dutch and British art, rare Chinese and English ceramics

and a section on Edward Wilson's expedition to Antarctica.

HOLST BIRTHPLACE MUSEUM

The composer Gustav Holst was born in Cheltenham in 1874, and his childhood home has been turned into the **Holst Birthplace Museum** (☎ 01242-524846; www.holstmuseum.org.uk; 4 Clarence Rd; adult/under 16yr £3.50/3; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sat mid-Feb-mid-Dec). The rooms are laid out in typical period fashion and feature much Holst memorabilia, including the piano on which most of *The Planets* was composed. You can also visit the Victorian kitchen, which explains what life was like 'below stairs'.

CHELTEHAM RACECOURSE

The town is more famous in some circles for its horse racing than its architecture, and Cheltenham's racecourse can attract up to 40,000 punters a day during the National Hunt Festival, often simply called 'the Festival'. Held in mid-March each year, this is England's premier steeplechase event and is attended by droves of breeders, trainers, riders and spectators. To experience what all the fuss is about, buy your **tickets** (☎ 01242-226226; www.cheltenham.co.uk) well in advance.

For race enthusiasts the **Hall of Fame museum** (☎ 01242-513014; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri), which charts the history of steeplechasing since 1819, is well worth a visit.

Tours

Guided 1½-hour **walking tours** (£4; ☎ 11am Mon-Fri, 11.30am Sat late Jun-mid-Sep) of Regency Cheltenham depart from the tourist office. You can also book tickets for a rolling program of day-long **coach tours** (adult/under 12yr £29/14) to various locations in the Cotswolds here.

Festivals & Events

Cheltenham is renowned as a city of festivals, and throughout the year you'll find major events going on in the city. For more information or to book tickets, visit www.cheltenhamfestivals.com.

Folk Festival A showcase of traditional and new-age folk talent in February.

National Hunt Festival The hottest week in the racing calendar on both sides of the Irish Sea; in March.

Jazz Festival An imaginative program hailed as the UK's finest jazz fest, held in April.

Science Festival Exploring the delights and intrigues of the world of science in June.

Music Festival A celebration of traditional and contemporary sounds with a geographical theme, in July.

Literature Festival A 10-day celebration of writers and the written word in October.

Sleeping

Cheltenham has an excellent choice of hotels and B&Bs, but few options in the budget range. Book as far in advance as possible during the festivals – especially for race week.

YMCA (☎ 01242-524024; www.cheltenhamymca.com; 6 Victoria Walk; dm/s £18.50/27.50) This elegant building right in the city centre now houses the cheapest beds in town. The four-bed dorms are fairly basic and well worn, but it's a great location and you'll find nothing else at this rate.

Big Sleep (☎ 01242-696999; www.thebigsleephotel.com; Wellington St; r £65-90; (P) (Q)) A luxury budget hotel, the Big Sleep chain offers stylish minimalism with thoroughly modern rooms featuring flat-screen TVs. At this price, it's an absolute steal, and if you're travelling with friends or family, the large family or group rooms make it an even better deal. You can also bring your own food and eat it in the bar.

Cheltenham Townhouse (☎ 01242-221922; www.cheltenhamtownhouse.co.uk; 12 Pittville Lawn; s £55-95, d £70-120; (P) (Q)) Modern decor with pale, neutral colours, stylish accessories, DVD players and broadband make this central option a good bet for a midrange budget. The Townhouse is set on a quiet street just out of the centre, but the spacious rooms and sparkling bathrooms make it worth the trip.

Beaumont House (☎ 01242-223311; www.bhhotel.co.uk; 56 Shurdington Rd; s £63-184, d £86-201; (P) (Q)) Set in a large garden just a short way from the centre of town, this boutique guest house is a memorable place with a range of carefully designed rooms with opulent decor. Go for the full-on safari look in Out of Africa, sultry boudoir in Out of Asia or more subtle design in the Prestbury Suite.

Hotel Kandinsky (☎ 01242-527788; www.aliashotels.com; Bayshill Rd; s £95, d £125-155; (P)) Gloriously quirky, keenly priced and extravagantly decked out, this is a 'funkier than average' hotel, with lots of eclectic modern art, exotic furniture, designer style and an extremely efficient but laid-back attitude. The slick, modern Cafe Paradiso (mains £14 to £19) serves an ambitious modern British menu.

our pick Thirty Two (☎ 01242-771110; www.thirtytwoitd.com; 32 Imperial Square; s/d from £139/154; (P) (Q) wi-fi) In a league of its own, this slick, boutique B&B is a rare find. It may charge hotel prices, but it's well worth it. You get the personal service of a B&B but the luxury, style and comfort of a top-notch hotel. Expect views over the Imperial gardens, muted colours, contemporary artwork, luxurious fabrics and rooms that could easily feature in a glossy style magazine.

Other options:

Abbey Hotel (☎ 01242-516053; www.abbeyhotel-cheltenham.com; 14-16 Bath Pde; s/d from £35/75; (P)) Convenient location and affordable prices but lacklustre rooms.

Hotel du Vin (☎ 01242-588450; www.hotelduvin.com; Parabola Rd; r from £145; (P) (Q)) Sleek, stylish and very hip – another winning offer from this luxury hotel chain.

Eating

Cheltenham has a great choice of top-end places to eat, but apart from the usual chains there's little choice for those on a more meagre budget. For the best range of options, head to Montpellier or the area around Suffolk Square.

Gusto (☎ 01242-239111; 12 Montpellier Walk; mains £6-8; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Thu, to 6.30pm Fri, to 5.30pm Sat) This Italian-style deli and cafe is a great place for lunchtime treats made with authentic Italian ingredients. Choose from pizzas, salads, meats and gorgeous pastas (try the gorgonzola and walnut for a real taste sensation).

Storyteller (☎ 01242-250343; 11 North Pl; mains £8-15) Feel-good comfort food draws the crowds to this enduringly popular restaurant that dishes up generous portions of barbecue ribs, seafood platters and vegetarian burritos on a menu fusing tastes from as far afield as Mexico and Asia.

Laze Daze (☎ 01242-257878; 81 The Promenade; mains £9-17) Overlooking the Promenade and just a stone's throw from the tourist office, this relaxed place serves a good range of contemporary brasserie-style food ranging from Barbary duck and venison steak to stuffed peppers and steamed mussels. The lunch and early evening set menus are a great deal (two/three courses £10/13).

Merlot Brasserie (☎ 01242-574008; 2a Ormond Terrace, Regent St; mains £11-16) A popular option right in the centre of town, the Merlot offers a menu of modern Mediterranean flavours.

It's a stylish place with contemporary design, subtle lighting and leather seats, and is a good option for lunch (mains £8 to £9).

Brosh (☎ 01242-227277; 8 Suffolk Pde; mains £14-18; ☹ dinner Wed-Sat) This lovely little place serves excellent eastern Mediterranean food with a great selection of meze and vegetarian dishes, as well as such delicacies as roast quail, lamb kefta and chargrilled chicken with sumac.

Daffodil (☎ 01242-700055; 18-20 Suffolk Pde; mains £14-19) A perennial favourite, the Daffodil is as loved for its top-notch modern British brasserie-style food as for its flamboyant surroundings. Set in a converted art-deco cinema, it harks back to the Roaring Twenties and features live jazz and blues every Monday night.

Other good options:

Le Champignon Sauvage (☎ 01242-573449; 24-26 Suffolk Rd; set menu 2-/3-course £39/48; ☹ Tue-Sat) An unpretentious but oh-so-delectable restaurant that has earned two Michelin stars for its inspired French cuisine.

Monty's Brasserie (☎ 01242-227678; 41 St George's Rd; mains £12-19; ☹ lunch & dinner) Bright, buzzing brasserie and seafood restaurant with a great lunch menu (£8 to £10).

Drinking

Thanks to its rather genteel nature, Cheltenham isn't the spot for a raucous night out. The following are the best in town.

Boogie Lounge (☎ 01242-238001; 1A Imperial Lane; admission £2-5; ☹ 10pm-2am Wed-Sat) Late-night club and music venue featuring everything from 1970s funk to '80s cheese and '90s pop. It's real floor-filling stuff and can get packed despite having two bars.

Subtone (☎ 01242-575925; 117 The Promenade; admission £2-6; ☹ 8pm-late Thu-Sat) One of the city's most popular venues, Subtone has three floors of DJs and live music at its basement club and piano bar. Expect everything from jazz and house to funk and rock.

Montpellier Wine Bar (☎ 01242-527774; Bayshill Lodge, Montpellier St; ☹ 10am-11pm) Slick, sophisticated and self-consciously cool, this is where Cheltenham's beautiful people come to hang out, sip wine and dine on modern British food (mains £12 to £17). There's an extensive wine list, cask ales and plenty of people-watching.

Circus (☎ 01242-578393; 5 Queen's Circus; ☹ 11am-11pm Mon-Sat, noon-10.30pm Sun) Giant windows look out over the busy street at this chic but relaxed Montpellier bar. It's the kind of

place where you chill out in a big leather chair and sup a drink, rather than downing a few pints before a night out.

Entertainment

The **Everyman Theatre** (☎ 01242-572573; www.everymantheatre.org.uk; Regent St) is Cheltenham's main stage and hosts everything from Elvis impersonators to comedy and panto, while the modern **Bacon Theatre** (☎ 01242-258002; www.bacontheatre.co.uk; Hatherly Rd) showcases touring shows, jazz and ballet. Classical-music lovers should look out for concerts at the **Pittville Pump Room** (☎ 01242-227979; www.pittvillepumproom.org.uk; Pittville Park). The **town hall** (☎ 01242-227979; www.cheltenhamtownhall.org.uk; Imperial Sq) offers more mainstream talent as well as hosting many festival events.

Getting There & Away

For information on public transport to and from Cheltenham, pick up a free copy of the handy *Getting There by Public Transport* guide from the tourist office.

BUS

National Express runs buses to London roughly hourly (£18, 3½ hours), and Swanbrook bus 853 goes to Oxford three times daily Monday to Saturday and once on Sunday (£7, 1½ hours).

Bus 94 (30 minutes) runs to Gloucester every 10 minutes Monday to Saturday and every 20 minutes on Sunday. Bus 51 goes to Cirencester (40 minutes, hourly).

Pulhams bus 801 runs to Moreton (one hour) via Bourton (35 minutes) and Stow (50 minutes) seven times daily Monday to Saturday. Castleways Coaches 606 runs four times daily Monday to Saturday to Broadway (50 minutes) via Winchcombe (20 minutes).

TRAIN

Cheltenham has trains to London (£50, 2¼ hours), Bristol (£9.20, 50 minutes), Gloucester (£3.10, nine minutes) and Bath (£14.30, 1¼ hours) roughly every half-hour.

Getting Around

Compass Holidays (☎ 01242-250642; www.compass-holidays.com; bikes per day/week from £12/52) has bicycles for hire at the train station. Bus D runs to Pittville Park from Portland St every 10 minutes.

TEWKESBURY

pop 9978

Tudor-heavy Tewkesbury hit the headlines in July 2007 when the Rivers Avon and Severn, which meet here, burst their banks and the town suffered some of the worst flooding in British history. Today there's little evidence to suggest anything untoward happened at all, the crooked half-timbered houses, buckled roof lines and narrow alleyways remain stuck in medieval glory, and the town's higgledy-piggledy charm is as apparent as ever. Take time to wander the ancient passageways that lead up to the town from the rivers, and then wander along Church St to the town's most glorious building, the magnificent medieval abbey church.

The **tourist office** (☎ 01684-855040; www.visitcots-woldsandsevernvalley.gov.uk; 100 Church St; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat year-round, 10am-4pm Sun Easter-Oct) is housed in a 17th-century hat shop that's also home to the **Out of the Hat** (www.outofthehat.org.uk; adult/child £4.70/2.50) heritage centre. It explores the history of the town and the restoration of the building and has plenty of interactive games for young visitors.

The town also has a second small **museum** (☎ 01684-292901; www.tewkesburymuseum.org; 64 Barton St; adult/child £1.50/75p; ☎ 1-4.30pm Tue-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat Mar-Aug, noon-3pm Tue-Fri, 11am-3pm Sat Sep-Oct, Sat only Nov-Mar) housed in a timber-framed building, which displays finds from Roman and medieval times as well as hosting an exhibition on Antarctic exploration.

Tewkesbury Abbey

This magnificent **abbey** (☎ 01684-850959; www.tewkesburyabbey.org.uk; guided tours £3; ☎ 7.30am-6pm, to 5pm Oct-Apr) is one of Britain's largest churches, far bigger than many of the country's cathedrals. The Norman abbey, built for the Benedictine monks, was consecrated in 1121 and was one of the last monasteries to be dissolved by Henry VIII. Although many of the monastery buildings were destroyed, the abbey church survived after being bought by the townspeople for the princely sum of £453 in 1542.

The church has a massive 40m-high tower and some spectacular Norman piers and arches in the nave. The Decorated-style chancel dates from the 14th century, however, and still retains much of its original stained glass. The church also features an organ dating from 1631, originally made for Magdalen

College, Oxford, and an extensive collection of medieval tombs. The most interesting is that of John Wakeman, the last abbot, who is shown as a vermin-ridden skeleton.

The church makes a wonderfully atmospheric venue for a range of summer concerts. You can find information on the website or at the **visitor centre** (☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat Apr-Sep) by the gate, which also houses an exhibition on the abbey's history.

Sleeping & Eating

Ivydene House (☎ 01684-592453; www.ivydenehouse.net; Uckinghall; s/d £45/70; ☎) This gorgeous B&B is well out of town but such a gem you'll be delighted you made the effort to get here. The rooms are luxuriously styled with a mix of contemporary fashion, classic furniture, soft colour schemes and gorgeous fabrics. Uckinghall is 7 miles north of Tewkesbury off the A38.

Aubergine (☎ 01684-292703; 73 Church St; mains £10-17; ☎ Tue-Sat) Set in a 15th-century building that's decidedly modern inside, this place is a welcome change from Tewkesbury's tearooms. The menu ranges from standard fare to more adventurous dishes such as venison casserole with honey and roast cardamom vegetables.

My Great Grandfathers (☎ 01684-292687; www.mygreatgrandfathers.com; 84-85 Church St; mains £9-15; ☎ Wed-Sun) Exposed oak beams and half-timbered walls set the tone in this otherwise modern place serving excellent afternoon teas and an interesting menu of classic and modern British cuisine.

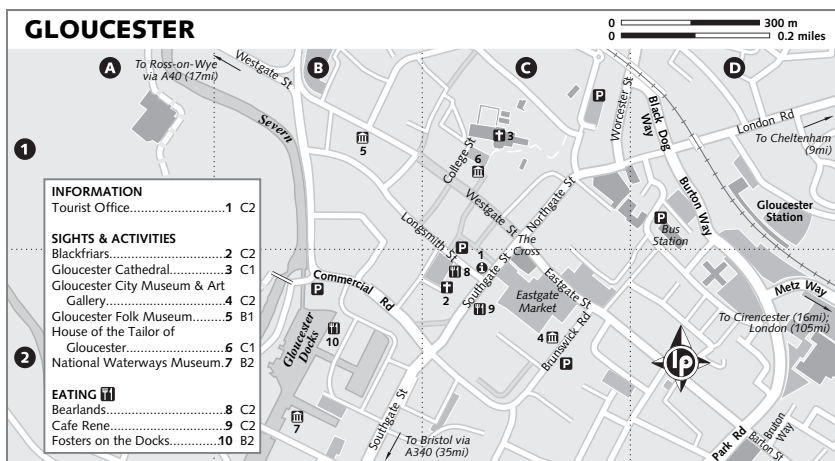
Getting There & Away

Bus 41 (25 minutes) runs to Cheltenham every 15 minutes and hourly on Sunday, and bus 71 (30 minutes, hourly) goes to Gloucester. The nearest train station is 1½ miles away at Ashchurch.

GLOUCESTER

pop 123,205

Gloucester (*glos-ter*) began life as a settlement for retired Roman soldiers, but really came into its own in medieval times when the pious public brought wealth and prosperity to what was then a prime pilgrimage city. The faithful flocked to see the grave of Edward the II and soon financed the building of what remains one of England's most beautiful cathedrals with an exquisite cloister.



In more recent years, Gloucester felt the brunt of hard times and the city fell into serious decline. The centre remains a rather dowdy, workaday place with brutalist architecture and a glut of greasy spoon cafes. But scratch under the surface and you'll find a glimmer of medieval character and the beginnings of a city trying hard to transform its fortunes. The historic docks are now home to trendy apartments, lively restaurants and interesting museums and are well worth a wander. Despite this, Gloucester makes a better day trip than a destination in itself.

Orientation & Information

The city centre is based on a medieval cruciform pattern, with Northgate, Southgate, Eastgate and Westgate Sts converging on the Cross.

The **tourist office** (☎ 01452-396572; www.visitgloucester.info; 28 Southgate St; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun, 11am-3pm Sun Jul & Aug) is conveniently located in the centre of town.

Sights

GLOUCESTER CATHEDRAL

The main reason to visit Gloucester is to see its magnificent **Gothic cathedral** (☎ 01452-528095; www.gloucestercathedral.org.uk; College Green; suggested donation £3; ☎ 8am-6pm), a stunning example of English Perpendicular style. Originally the site of a Saxon abbey, a Norman church was built here by a group of Benedictine monks in the 12th century, and when Edward II was murdered in 1327, the church was chosen as

his burial place. Edward's tomb proved so popular, however, that Gloucester became a centre of pilgrimage and the income generated from the pious pilgrims financed the church's conversion into the magnificent building seen today.

Inside, the cathedral skilfully combines the best of Norman and Gothic design with sturdy columns, creating a sense of gracious solidity and wonderful Norman arcading draped with beautiful mouldings. From the elaborate 14th-century wooden choir stalls, you'll get a good view of the imposing **Great East Window**, one of the largest in England.

To see the window in more detail, head for the **Tribune Gallery**, where you can also see an **exhibition** (admission £2; ☎ 10.30am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat) on its creation. As you walk around the **Whispering Gallery**, you'll notice that even the quietest of murmurs reverberates across the wonderfully elaborate lierne vaulting. Beneath the window in the northern ambulatory is Edward II's magnificent tomb, and nearby is the late-15th-century **Lady Chapel**, a glorious patchwork of stained glass.

One of the cathedral's greatest treasures, however, is the exquisite **Great Cloister**. Completed in 1367, it is the first example of fan vaulting in England and is only matched in beauty by Henry VIII's Chapel at Westminster Abbey. You (or your children) might recognise the cloister from the first two Harry Potter films: it was used in the corridor scenes at Hogwart's School.

A wonderful way to take in the glory of the cathedral is to attend one of the many musical

recitals and concerts held here. The stunning acoustics and breathtaking surroundings are pretty much guaranteed to make your hair stand on end.

For more cathedral insights and a fantastic view of the town, climb the 69m **tower** on an hour-long guided **tour** (adult/under 16yr £3/1; ☎ tours 2.30pm Wed-Fri, 1.30pm & 2.30pm Sat & bank holidays). Because of the steep steps it's not recommended for children under 10. Civic Trust volunteers also provide guided tours of the **cathedral** (☎ 10.45am-3.15pm Mon-Sat, noon-2.30pm Sun).

OTHER SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

A major part of the city's regeneration is taking place at **Gloucester Docks**, once Britain's largest inland port. Fifteen beautiful Victorian warehouses, many now restored, surround the canal basins and house a series of museums, shops and cafes, plus a large antiques centre.

The largest warehouse, Llanthony, is home to the newly revamped **National Waterways Museum** (☎ 01452-318200; www.nwm.org.uk; adult/under 16yr £4/3; ☎ 10am-5pm), a hands-on kind of place where you can discover the history of inland waterways. Exhibitions explain what life was like living, working and moving on the water, featuring plenty of historic boats and interactive exhibits that are great for children. Included in the admission price is a 45-minute **boat trip** (non-museum visitors adult/under 16yr £4.75/3.50; ☎ noon, 1.30 & 2.30pm Apr-Oct) along the canal.

For more local history, the **Gloucester Folk Museum** (☎ 01452-396868; 99-103 Westgate St; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat) examines domestic life, crafts and industries from 1500 to the present. The museum is housed in a wonderful series of Tudor and Jacobean timber-framed buildings dating from the 16th and 17th centuries.

Also worth visiting are 13th-century **Blackfriars** (Ladybellgate St; admission free), one of Britain's best-preserved Dominican friaries, and the **Gloucester City Museum & Art Gallery** (☎ 01452-396131; www.gloucester.gov.uk/citymuseum; Brunswick Rd; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat), which houses everything from dinosaur fossils and Roman artefacts to paintings by the artists Turner and Gainsborough.

Tours

The Civic Trust operates one-hour guided **walking tours** (☎ 01452-396572; adult £3-4; ☎ Jun-Sep) of the city leaving from the tourist office on Southgate St at 2pm. Tours include a Historic

Gloucester Walk, Beatrix Potter tours, cathedral tours, ghost walks, historic dock tours and Blackfriars tours. You can also pick up a free *Via Sacra* self-guided walk brochure from the tourist office, which will guide you on an hour-long walking trail around the city's most historic buildings.

Sleeping & Eating

Gloucester's accommodation options are pretty grim. You'd be far better off staying in Cheltenham (10 minutes by train) instead.

Fosters on the Docks (☎ 01452-300990; Kimberley Warehouse; mains £7-10; ☎ 10am-11.30pm Mon-Sat, 11am-10.30pm Sun) The most lively option down at the historic docks is this cheerful place serving tapas, traditional grills and Mediterranean dishes including pizza and pasta. There's a nice conservatory overlooking the water, as well as more cosy dining in the industrial chic interior.

Cafe Rene (☎ 01452-309340; www.cafere.ne.co.uk; 31 Southgate St; mains £7-10; ☎ noon-11.30pm) For a decent but predictable choice of pub grub head to this cheery joint through the archway on Southgate. There's live music on Wednesday nights and a pleasant beer garden outside. Food is served until 9.30pm and includes everything from wraps and sandwiches (£4.50) at lunch to burgers, chilli, pasta and curry by night.

Bearlands (☎ 01452-419966; Longsmith St; 2/3-course dinner £23/25; ☎ closed Mon & Sun) Crisp white linen, a large airy conservatory and an atmospheric vaulted wine cellar make Bearlands an interesting and popular venue. It's a stylish place serving a competent modern British menu in relaxing surroundings.

Getting There & Away

National Express has buses roughly every two hours to London (£18, 3½ hours). Bus 94 runs to Cheltenham (30 minutes, six hourly), with an express bus X94 cutting the journey to 15 minutes during rush hour. The quickest journey between the two cities is by train (10 minutes, every 20 minutes).

FOREST OF DEAN

pop 79,982

An ancient woodland with a unique, almost magical character, the Forest of Dean is the oldest oak forest in England and a wonderfully scenic place to walk, cycle or paddle. Its steep, wooded hills, winding, tree-lined

THE TAILOR OF GLOUCESTER

Beatrix Potter's magical tale of good-hearted mice saving a feverish Gloucester tailor from ruin was inspired by a local legend about real-life tailor John Prichard. Like the tailor in Potter's tale, Prichard had been commissioned to make a coat for the mayor, but left the garment at cutting stage on a Friday night. He returned on Monday to find it finished, save for a single button hole. A note pinned to it read 'No more twist'.

Commercially minded Mr Prichard was soon encouraging people to come in and see his workshop where 'waistcoats are made at night by the fairies'. In reality, his two assistants had slept off a Saturday night bender at the workshop and woke to see the faithful heading to the cathedral for mass. Consumed by guilt and hoping to make amends, they had tried to finish the coat but ran out of thread.

The **House of the Tailor of Gloucester** (☎ 01452-422856; 9 College Ct; 🕒 10am-4pm Mon-Sat, to 4pm Sun), the house that Potter used in her illustrations, is now a museum and souvenir shop dedicated to the author.

roads and glimmering lakes make it a remarkably tranquil place, and an excellent spot for outdoor pursuits.

The forest was formerly a royal hunting ground and a centre of iron and coal mining, and its mysterious depths were supposedly the inspiration for Tolkien's setting in *The Lord of the Rings* and for JK Rowling's Harry Potter adventures. Numerous other writers, poets, artists and craftspeople have been inspired by the stunning scenery, designated England's first National Forest Park in 1938.

Covering 42 sq miles between Gloucester, Ross-on-Wye and Chepstow, the forest is in an isolated position, but Coleford, the main population centre, has good transport connections.

The **tourist office** (☎ 01594-812388; www.visitforestofdean.co.uk; High St, Coleford; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Apr-Sep, to 2pm Sun Jul & Aug, to 4pm Mon-Fri Oct-Mar, to 2pm Sat Oct, Feb & Mar) stocks walking and cycling guides and also offers a free accommodation booking service. If you've got your own transport, pick up the *Royal Forest Route* and *Heritage Trail* leaflets, which describe tours through the forest and its most significant sights.

Sights & Activities

Your first stop should be the **Dean Heritage Centre** (☎ 01594-822170; www.deanheritemuseum.com; Camp Mill, Soudley; adult/under 16yr £5/3; 🕒 10am-5pm Mar-Oct, to 4pm Sat & Sun Nov-Feb), which explains the history of the forest and its free miners from medieval times to the industrial age. There's also a reconstructed forest home, adventure playground and art gallery on site.

If you're travelling with children, **Puzzle Wood** (☎ 01594-833187; www.puzzlewood.net; adult/under 12yr £4/3; 🕒 10am-5.30pm Apr-Sep, 11am-4pm Oct) is a must. This overgrown pre-Roman, open-cast ore mine has a maze of paths, weird rock formations, tangled vines and eerie passageways and offers a real sense of discovery. Puzzle Wood is 1 mile south of Coleford on the B4228.

Mined for iron ore for more than 4000 years, the **Clearwell Caves** (☎ 01594-832535; www.clearwellcaves.com; adult/under 16yr £5.50/3; 🕒 10am-5pm Feb-Oct) are a warren of passageways, caverns and pools that help explain the forest's history of mining. The caves are signposted off the B4228 a mile south of Coleford.

In contrast to the caves, **Hopewell Colliery** (☎ 01594-810706; www.hopewellcoalmine.co.uk; adult/under 14yr £4/3; 🕒 10am-4pm Easter-Oct) offers underground tours of the mine workings, with miners as guides. The colliery is on the B4226 between Coleford and Cinderford.

In Newland, you can visit the 'Cathedral of the Forest', the 13th-century **All Saints**. The church was restored and partially rebuilt in the 19th century and houses some fine stained-glass windows, as well as a unique brass depicting a miner with a *nelly* (tallow candle) in his mouth, a pick in his hand and a *billy* (backpack) on his back.

Sleeping & Eating

our pick **St Briavels Castle YHA** (☎ 0845 371 9042; www.yha.org.uk; Lydney; dm from £15.95; 📍) Live like a king for a night at this unique hostel set in an imposing moated castle once used as King John's hunting lodge. Loaded with character and a snip at this price, the hostel also hosts lively

medieval banquets on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays in August.

Old Nibley Farmhouse (☎ 01594-516770; www.oldnibleyfarmhouse.co.uk; Nibley Hill, Blakeney; s/d £36/72) Set in a 300-year-old farmhouse, this warm and friendly B&B has a range of bright and pretty rooms with pale fabrics and furnishings livened up with a dash of colour in the cushions and throws. The sitting room has a large fireplace and exposed beams; a cosy enclave on a wet weekend.

Tudor Farmhouse Hotel (☎ 01594-833046; www.tudorfarmhousehotel.co.uk; High St, Clearwell; s £60, d £90-140) You'll find oak beams, exposed stonework and old-world charm at this rustic 13th-century hotel and former farmhouse. There's a wide variety of rooms, from comfortable singles to luxurious four-posters and a popular restaurant (dinner mains £15 to £20) serving modern British fare.

Three Choirs Vineyard (☎ 01531-890223; www.threechoirs.com; Newent; s £85-125, d £95-135; 📍) This working vineyard has a range of extremely comfortable, classically styled rooms overlooking the sweeping fields of vines. You can also take a guided tour of the vineyard (£8), try the award-winning wines and then relax over lunch (mains £11 to £15) or dinner (mains £17 to £20) in the bright and airy restaurant. There's also a gift shop and micro-brewery on site.

Garden Cafe (☎ 01594-860075; www.gardencafe.co.uk; Lwr Lydbrook; mains £8-13; 📍 lunch Fri, Sat & Sun, dinner Fri, Sat & Mon) An award-winning organic cafe on the banks of the River Wye, this place is set in a converted malt house and surrounded by a beautiful walled garden. The food ranges from classic dishes such as pork schnitzel to the more exotic Imam Byaldi: stuffed aubergine with pine nuts, tomato and raisins.

Getting There & Around

From Gloucester, bus 31 (one hour, half-hourly) runs to Coleford and there are trains to Lydney (20 minutes, hourly). The **Dean Forest Railway** (☎ 01594-845840; www.deanforestrailway.co.uk) runs steam trains from Lydney to Parkend (day tickets adult/under 16 years £9/5) on selected days from March to December.

You can hire road/mountain/premium bikes (£14/18/22 per day), buy maps and get advice on cycling routes at **Pedalabikeaway** (☎ 01594-860065; www.pedalabikeaway.com; Cannock Valley; 📍 Tue-Sun) near Coleford.

HERTFORDSHIRE

Firmly on the commuter belt and within easy reach of the capital, Hertfordshire is a small, sleepy county liberally scattered with satellite towns that threaten to overtake the fast-disappearing countryside. However, it is also home to the historic town of St Albans, with its elegant Georgian streetscapes and Roman remains, and to Hatfield House, a spectacular stately home well worth the effort to visit.

ST ALBANS

pop 114,710

A bustling market town with a host of crooked Tudor buildings and elegant Georgian town houses, St Albans makes a pleasant day trip from London. The town was founded as Verulamium after the Roman invasion of AD 43, but was renamed St Albans in the 3rd century after a Roman soldier, Alban, lost his head in punishment for sheltering a Christian priest. He became England's first Christian martyr and the small city soon became a site of pilgrimage.

The pilgrims brought business and, subsequently, wealth to the town, and eventually the object of their affection was enshrined in what is now a magnificent cathedral. The town is also home to an excellent Roman museum, an array of chichi shops and upmarket restaurants and some wonderful pubs.

Orientation & Information

St Peter's St, 10 minutes' walk west of the train station on Victoria St, is the focus of the town but is scarred by an ugly array of plastic shop fronts. Get off the main drag to discover the quiet back streets lined with elegant buildings or follow George St into Fishpool St, a charming lane that winds its way past old-world pubs to leafy Verulamium Park.

The **tourist office** (☎ 01727-864511; www.stalbans.gov.uk; Market Pl; 📍 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, to 4pm every 2nd Sun & mid-Jul-mid-Sep) is in the grand town hall in the marketplace. It stocks the *St Albans City Trail*, a free guide to the town's most historic buildings. It's also the best place for information on a dizzying array of themed guided walks (adult/child £3/1.50) that take place throughout the year.

Sights

ST ALBANS CATHEDRAL

Set in tranquil grounds away from the din of the main streets, St Albans' magnificent

cathedral (☎ 01727-890200; www.stalbanscathedral.org.uk; admission by donation; ☎ 8am-5.45pm) is a lesson in architectural history. The church began life as a Benedictine monastery in 793, built by King Offa of Mercia around the tomb of St Alban. In Norman times, it was completely rebuilt using material from the old Roman town of Verulamium, and then, in the 12th and 13th centuries, Gothic extensions and decorations were added.

The deceptively simple nave gives way to stunningly ornate ceilings, semi-lost wall paintings, an elaborate nave screen and, of course, the shrine of St Alban. There's also a luminescent rose window from the 20th century. The best way to appreciate the wealth of history contained in the building is to join a **free guided tour** (☎ 11.30am & 2.30pm Mon-Fri, 11.30am & 2pm Sat, 2.30pm Sun). If you miss the tour you can pick up a very helpful free plan and guide at the entrance.

VERULAMIUM MUSEUM & ROMAN RUINS

A fantastic exposé of everyday life under the Romans, the **Verulamium Museum** (☎ 01727-751810; www.stalbansmuseums.org.uk; St Michael's St; adult/child £3.30/2; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 2-5.30pm Sun) is home to a large collection of arrowheads, glassware and grave goods. Its centre-piece, however, is the **Mosaic Room**, where five superb mosaic floors, uncovered between 1930 and 1955, are laid out. You can also see recreations of Roman rooms, and learn about life in the settlement through interactive and audiovisual displays. Every second weekend, the museum is invaded by Roman soldiers who demonstrate the tactics and tools of the Roman army.

Adjacent **Verulamium Park** has remains of a basilica, bathhouse and parts of the city wall. You can pick up a map of the area with information on the site from the museum or tourist office.

Across the busy A4147 are the grassy foundations of a **Roman theatre** (☎ 01727-835035; www.romantheatre.co.uk; adult/child £2/1; ☎ 10am-5pm Mar-Oct, to 4pm Nov-Feb), which once seated 2000 spectators.

OTHER SIGHTS

For a potted history of St Albans, take a look at the local **museum** (☎ 01727-819340; www.stalbansmuseums.org.uk; Hatfield Rd; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun), which houses displays from Roman times to the present.

ST ALBANS BEER FESTIVAL

Beer is big business in England, and to pint-swilling connoisseurs, real ale is the only brew that matters. To celebrate its key role in national culture, Camra (the Campaign for Real Ale) hosts a four-day beer festival in St Albans at the end of September. Close to 5000 people converge on the Alban Arena off St Peter's St to sample and talk about the 300-odd real ales on tap. (For more information on real ales, see p79). With food, music and ale on offer, and tickets a mere £2.50 to £4, it's a great excuse for a party. For more information, see www.stalbansbeerfestival.info.

On High St, you'll find England's only medieval **clock tower** (High St; adult/child 80/40p; ☎ 10.30am-5pm Sat, Sun & bank holidays Apr-Oct), a fine flint tower built around 1410. 'Gabriel' (the original bell) is still there.

Sleeping & Eating

Park House (☎ 01727-811910; www.parkhouseonline.co.uk; 30 The Park; s/d £35/55; ☎ wi-fi) Bright rooms with crisp, white linens, white wicker chairs and subtle floral patterns give this small B&B a fresh and airy feel. It's set in a quiet residential area within walking distance of town, and is a good deal for the price.

St Michael's Manor (☎ 01727-864444; www.stmichaelsmanor.com; Fishpool St; r from £145; ☎ wi-fi) Set in beautiful grounds complete with a glistening lake, this elegant, classically styled hotel has a range of comfortable rooms with views over the gracious gardens. An air of restrained luxury permeates the place, with tip-top service in the modern British restaurant (mains £14 to £20).

Lussmanns Eatery (☎ 01727-851941; Waxhouse Gate; mains £7-16; ☎ 11.30am-10pm Mon-Thu, to 10.30pm Fri & Sat, to 9pm Sun) This bright, modern restaurant just off the High St is enduringly popular with locals despite ample competition around town. It serves a menu of mainly Mediterranean dishes in a bright, modern space with oak, leather and metal decor.

Mantra (☎ 01727-811115; 6 The Collonade; mains £9-12; ☎ closed dinner Sun) Excellent modern Japanese food is on the menu at this slick joint where sushi, sashimi and maki compete with wonderful curries, noodles and grills. You'll probably have to make a return visit to fit it all in.

Darcy's (☎ 01727-730777; 2 Hatfield Rd; mains £11-18) This stylish, contemporary restaurant has a menu of modern European dishes with the odd Aussie influence thrown in. Go for barbecue kangaroo with aubergine relish or play it safe with sea bass on a bed of Catalan stew.

Drinking

our pick **Ye Olde Fighting Cocks** (☎ 01727-869152; 16 Abbey Mill Lane) Reputedly the oldest pub in England, this unusual, octagonal-shaped inn has oodles of charm. Oliver Cromwell spent a night here, stabling his horses in what's now the bar, and underground tunnels lead to the cathedral. Drink in this historic atmosphere while you nurse your pint.

Rose & Crown (☎ 01727-851903; 10 St Michael's St) Another St Albans favourite, this 16th-century pub with a beautiful beer garden features live music during the week.

Getting There & Away

Trains depart London St Pancras station to St Albans station (£8.90, 23 minutes, every 10 minutes), which is on Victoria St, a 10-minute walk east of St Peter's St.

AROUND ST ALBANS

Hatfield House

For over 400 years, **Hatfield House** (☎ 01707-287010; house & garden adult/child £10/4.50, garden only £2.50/1.50; ☎ noon-4pm Wed-Sun & public holidays, gardens 11am-5.30pm Easter-Sep) has been home to the Cecils, one of England's most influential political families. This magnificent Jacobean mansion was built between 1607 and 1611 for Robert Cecil, first earl of Salisbury and secretary of state to both Elizabeth I and James I, and is awash with grandiose portraits, tapestries, furnishings and armour. Look out for the grand marble hall, the stunning carved-oak staircase and the stained glass in the chapel.

Outside, the vast grounds were landscaped by 17th-century botanist John Tradescant, and you can see an old oak tree that marks the spot where Elizabeth I, who spent much of her childhood here, first heard of her accession to the throne.

If you'd really like to get into the character of the house, you can attend a four-course Elizabethan banquet, complete with minstrels and court jesters, in the atmospheric Great Hall on Friday nights (£47.50). Book on ☎ 01707-262055.

The house is opposite Hatfield train station, and there are trains from London King's Cross station (£7.40, 20 minutes, half-hourly). Between them, buses 300, 301 and 724 run every 10 minutes between St Albans and Hatfield (32 minutes).

Shaw's Corner

Preserved in time and much as he left it, **Shaw's Corner** (NT; ☎ 01438-820307; www.nationaltrust.org.uk/shawscorner; Ayot St Lawrence; adult/child £4.95/2.50; ☎ 1-5pm Wed-Sun mid-Mar-Nov) is a tranquil Arts and Crafts building that was home to George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) for the last 44 years of his life. His study contains his typewriter, pens, inkwell and dictionaries, and in the garden you can see his writing hut (which revolves to catch the sun) where he penned several works including *Pygmalion*, the play on which the film *My Fair Lady* was based. The Oscar he received for the screenplay is also on display.

Ayot St Lawrence is 6 miles north of St Albans, off the B651. Bus 304 from St Albans will drop you off at Gustardwood, 1.5 miles from Ayot St Lawrence.

BEDFORDSHIRE

Sleepy and understated Bedfordshire is a rural hideaway home to the majestic stately pile, Woburn Abbey, and to the attractive market town of Bedford. The River Great Ouse weaves across the pastoral fields of the north of the county, creating several pristine nature reserves and some good woodland walks. To the south, the last gasps of the Chiltern hills protect the county from the worst of the industrialisation of the capital.

BEDFORD

pop 82,488

The historic county town of Bedford enjoys a lovely riverside setting on the banks of the Great Ouse. Although the centre of town is overrun with high-street chain shops, if you wander a little further you'll find a host of interesting sites connected to the town's most famous export, John Bunyan (1628-88), the 17th-century Nonconformist preacher and author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Located in the town hall, the **tourist office** (☎ 01234-221712; www.bedford.gov.uk/tourism; Town Hall, St Paul's Sq; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Sat & 10am-2pm

Sun May-Aug, 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat Sep-Apr) stocks a free guide to places with a Bunyan connection, and runs free guided walks on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings between May and August.

If you're visiting in July 2010, you can join the festivities at the **Bedford River Festival**, a bi-annual event featuring theatre, dance, music, historic re-enactments, rowing and Dragon Boat racing.

Sights

Want to know just how Glenn Miller, Ronnie Barker and Nelson Mandela are connected to the area? Start your sightseeing with a trip to the **Bedford Room** at the tourist office for a potted history of the town.

The **Bunyan Meeting Free Church** (☎ 01234-213722; www.bunyanmeeting.co.uk; Mill St; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sat Mar-Oct) was built in 1849 on the site of the barn where Bunyan preached from 1671 to 1688. The church's bronze doors, inspired by Ghiberti's doors for the Baptistery in Florence, show 10 scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and inside the stained-glass windows also show scenes from the tome.

Next door, the **John Bunyan Museum** (☎ 01234-213722; admission free; ☎ 10am-3.45pm Tue-Sat Mar-Oct) has displays on the author's life including his time in prison, as well as 169 editions of *The Pilgrim's Progress* from around the world. There are recreated scenes from the period including a kitchen, and various artefacts such as his writing desk, a violin he made and his prison door from the county jail, which was demolished in 1801.

Although closed for renovation works until late 2009, the excellent **Cecil Higgins Art Gallery** (☎ 01234-211222; Castle Lane; admission free; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sat, 2-5pm Sun) houses work by Blake, Turner, Rossetti, Picasso and Edvard Munch.

Next door, the **Bedford Museum** (☎ 01234-353323; www.bedfordmuseum.org; admission free; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sat, 2-5pm Sun) has archaeological and historical exhibits telling Bedford's story.

Eating

Santaniello (☎ 01234-353742; 9 Newnham St; pizzas £5-9; ☎ lunch & dinner Sat, lunch Tue-Sun) Bedford has quite a large Italian community, and this cheery, bustling place with red-and-white tablecloths and lively waiters serves up Italian favourites with a smile.

Tokyo (☎ 01234-266100; 21 Greyfriars; dinner buffet adult/child £12.90/6.50; ☎ lunch Sat & Sun, dinner

Tue-Sun) This bright, cheery Japanese restaurant has a sushi conveyor the length of the room, and serves a wide range of à la carte dishes. The evening buffet is excellent value and includes sushi, tempura, dumplings and noodle dishes.

Getting There & Away

Stagecoach X5 runs from Bedford to Cambridge (£4.50, 1½ hours) and Oxford (£8, two hours) every half-hour.

There are frequent trains from London St Pancras (£15.90, 45 minsutes, every 10 minutes) to Bedford's Midland station, a well-signposted 500m walk west of the High St.

WOBURN ABBEY & SAFARI PARK

The pretty Georgian village of Woburn is home to Bedfordshire's biggest attractions: a palatial stately home and Europe's largest conservation park.

Once a Cistercian abbey but dissolved by Henry VIII and awarded to the earl of Bedford, **Woburn Abbey** (☎ 01525-290333; www.woburnabbey.com; adult/child £10.50/6; ☎ 11am-5.30pm Apr-Oct, last entry 4pm) is a wonderful country pile set within a 1200-hectare deer park. The house is stuffed with 18th-century furniture, porcelain and silver, and displays paintings by Gainsborough, Van Dyck and Canaletto. Highlights include Queen Victoria's bedroom, where she slept with Prince Albert; the beautiful wall hangings and cabinets of the Chinese Room; the mysterious story of the Flying Duchess; and the gilt-adorned dining room. An audio tour brings the history of the house and the people who lived here to life. Outside, the gardens are well worth a wander and host theatre and music events during the summer months.

On an equally grand scale is **Woburn Safari Park** (☎ 01525-290407; www.woburnsafari.co.uk; adult/child £17.50/13.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Apr-Oct, 11am-4pm Sat & Sun Nov-Feb, last entry 1hr before closing), the country's largest drive-through animal reserve. Rhinos, tigers, lions, zebras, bison, monkeys, elephants and giraffes roam the grounds, while in the 'foot safari' area, you can see sea lions, penguins and lemurs. Pick up a timetable on arrival for information on feeding times, keeper talks and animal demonstrations.

For both attractions, buy a passport ticket (adult/child £20.50/16) that can be used on two separate days within any 12-month period.

The abbey and safari park are easily accessible by car off the M1 motorway. First Capital Connect run trains from King's Cross to Flitwick, the nearest station. From here it's a 15-minute taxi journey (£15 to £20) to Woburn.

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

The chalky, forested Chiltern Hills and sweeping valleys of Buckinghamshire are pitted with the stately homes and country estates of the rich and famous. The gentle, rolling countryside won the hearts of the Rothschild dynasty in the 19th century, and they duly invested in some plum real estate around the historic town of Aylesbury. The pièce de résistance is the magnificent Renaissance-style chateau Waddesdon Manor.

Buckinghamshire was also a favourite with the more poetic types: John Milton lived in Chalfont St Giles; Robert Frost spent time in Beaconsfield; and TS Eliot and Percy Bysshe Shelley both lived in Marlow, 100 years apart.

The south of the county is dominated by the beech woods of the scenic Chilterns, and the forest walks and mountain-bike trails that criss-cross the region are popular throughout the year.

AYLESBURY

pop 69,021

Make your way past the confusing road system and modern eyesores to Aylesbury's old town and you'll be rewarded with narrow winding streets flanked by pretty 17th-century houses, a thriving local market and the lovely, medieval St Mary's Church.

Henry VIII courted Anne Boleyn in the local inn, the King's Head, now home to the **tourist office** (☎ 01296-330559; King's Head Passage; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat Apr-Oct, 10am-4.30pm Mon-Sat Nov-Mar). You can pick up an informative heritage-walk leaflet (50p) here for information on the town's sights.

The main sight is the **Buckinghamshire County Museum** (☎ 01296-331441; www.buckscc.gov.uk/museum; Church St; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Mar-late Jun & late-Aug to Oct, from 1pm late Jun-late Aug, 10am-4pm Nov-Feb), which takes visitors through life in the county from Roman times to the present.

In the award-winning **Ronald Dahl Children's Gallery** (☎ 3-5pm Apr-Oct, 10am-5pm school holidays;

adult/child £4.50/4), kids of all ages can investigate the beasts inside James' Giant Peach, explore Fantastic Mr Fox's tunnel and see the Twit's upside-down bedroom.

Trains run to and from London Marylebone (£11.80, one hour, every 15 minutes).

AROUND AYLESBURY

Waddesdon Manor

Dripping with gilt, crystal chandeliers, tapestries, fine porcelain and elaborate furniture, **Waddesdon Manor** (☎ 01296-653226; www.waddesdon.org.uk; adult/child house & gardens £15/11; ☎ noon-4pm Wed-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat & Sun mid-Mar-late Oct) is a stunning Renaissance-style chateau built by Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild to showcase his collection of French decorative arts. The baron liked to do things on a grand scale, and the ostentatious magnificence of the house, designed by French architect Destailleur and completed in 1889, is almost overwhelming.

Very little space is left unadorned – only the Bachelor's Wing stands out as being noticeably more restrained. The baron used the house for his glamorous parties, and it's not hard to imagine the great and good of the 19th century living it up in the palatial rooms. Visitors can view his outstanding collection of art, Sèvres porcelain, expensive furniture and the extensive wine cellar. The houses hosts a variety of events throughout the year, from Christmas fairs to wine-tasting days, Valentine's dinners and opera and theatre events. Weekends get busy, so book tickets in advance.

The beautiful **gardens** (gardens only adult/child £7/3.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun mid-Mar-late Oct, Sat & Sun Jan-mid-Mar) boast rare flowers, divine views and a Rococo-revival aviary filled with exotic birds.

If the idea of grand living whets your appetite, spend the night at the **Five Arrows** (☎ 01296-651727; www.waddesdon.org.uk/five_arrows; High St, Waddesdon; s £65, d £85-175; (P) (Q)), a stunning, half-timbered lodge at the gates to the estate. Built in 1887 by Baron Rothschild to house the architects and craftsmen who were working on his house, the five arrows refer to the Rothschild coat of arms and represent the five sons of the dynasty's founder, Mayer Amschel Rothschild. Rooms are furnished with antiques and original pieces from the manor, and the restaurant (mains £12 to £18) serves a seasonal modern British menu.

Waddesdon is 6 miles northwest of Aylesbury off the A41. From the Aylesbury bus station,

take bus 16 (15 minutes, hourly Monday to Friday, every two hours Saturday).

Bletchley Park

Once England's best-kept secret, **Bletchley Park** (☎ 01908-640404; www.bletchleypark.org.uk; The Manor, Bletchley; adult/12-16 yr/under 12 yr £10/8/free; 🗺 9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-5pm Sat & Sun) was the scene of a huge code-breaking operation during WWII, dramatised in the film *Enigma*. Almost 8,500 people worked here in total secrecy intercepting, decrypting, translating and interpreting enemy correspondence. Exhibitions explain the complex process and the hard work, frustration and successes that shaped this secret war effort. You can also see a collection of Churchill memorabilia, a computer museum tracing the development of computers from the early Bletchley model 'Colossus' to the modern day, and get an idea of what life was like for civilians during the war.

Bletchley is just south of Milton Keynes off the B4034. There are regular trains running from London Euston to Bletchley (40 minutes).

STOWE

Stowe, the sort of private school so exclusive that its driveway is half a mile long, is housed in the neoclassical splendour of **Stowe House** (☎ 01280-818166; www.shpt.org; adult/child £4/2.50; 🗺 tours 2pm Wed-Sun Apr & Jul-Oct, Sat & Sun Nov-Mar & Jun, noon-5pm selected days Jul & Aug). Mere mortals are permitted to visit the eight state rooms which connect in a 137m enfilade and offer stunning views of the wonderful grounds. Although the rooms are left bare (the house's contents were sold off to rescue the original owners from financial disaster), the sheer scale and ornamentation of the building is highly impressive. An interpretive centre explains the rise and fall of the family who lived here and offers a glimpse into the elaborate world of Britain's landed gentry in the 18th century. The opening hours for the house are complex, so check the website before travelling.

For many, the real draw at Stowe is not the house but the extraordinary **Georgian gardens** (NT; ☎ 01280-822850; www.nationaltrust.org.uk; adult/child £6.90/3.50; 🗺 10.30am-5.30pm Wed-Sun Mar-Oct, to 4pm Sat & Sun Nov-Feb, last admission 1½ hr before closing), which cover 400 hectares and were worked on by the greatest British landscape gardeners,

including Charles Bridgeman, William Kent and Capability Brown.

The gardens are best known for their 32 temples, created in the 18th century by the wealthy owner Sir Richard Temple (no kidding), whose family motto was *Templa Quam Delecta* (How Delightful Are Your Temples). There are also arches, lakes and a Palladian bridge among other buildings.

Stowe is 3 miles northwest of Buckingham off the A422. There are buses from Aylesbury to Buckingham (45 minutes, hourly) from where it's an £8 taxi ride.

BERKSHIRE

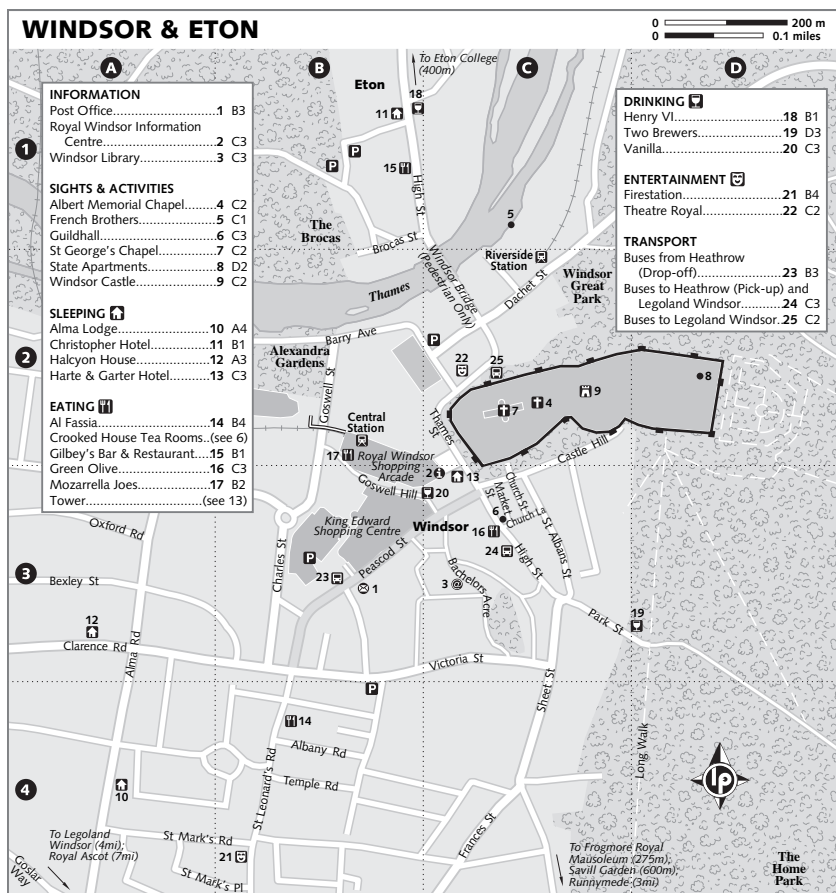
Long known as the 'Royal County of Berkshire', this rather posh and prosperous part of the world acts as a country getaway for some of England's most influential figures. Within easy reach of London and yet entirely different in character, the pastoral landscape is littered with handsome villages and historic houses as well as some of the top attractions in the country. Few visitors make it past the historic towns of Windsor and Eton, home to the Queen's favourite castle and the world-renowned public school, but wander further afield and you'll be rewarded with tranquil rural countryside and exquisitely maintained villages.

WINDSOR & ETON

pop 30,568

Dominated by the massive bulk and heavy influence of Windsor Castle, these twin towns have a rather surreal atmosphere, with the morning pomp and ceremony of the changing of the guards in Windsor and the sight of school boys dressed in formal tail coats wandering the streets of Eton.

Windsor Castle, with its romantic architecture and superb state rooms, is an absolute must-see, while across the bridge over the Thames, England's most famous public school has an altogether different flavour. To cater for the droves of tourists that visit these star attractions, Windsor town centre is full of expensive boutiques, grand cafes and trendy restaurants. Eton, by comparison, is far quieter, its pedestrianised centre lined with antique shops and art galleries. Both towns exude an air of affluence, and if you're travelling on a tight budget, a day trip from London is probably your best bet.



Orientation

Windsor and Eton are separated by the River Thames, with a pedestrianised bridge linking the two towns. The massive castle marks the centre of Windsor, with the town's main drag, Peascod St, leading away from its soaring stone walls. Castle Hill and Thames St skirt the edge of the castle, the latter leading down to the bridge to Eton.

Information

The **Royal Windsor Information Centre** (☎ 01753-743900; www.windsor.gov.uk; Old Booking Hall, Windsor Royal Shopping Arcade; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, to 4pm Sun) sells bus and local attraction tickets, and has an **accommodation booking service** (☎ 01753-743907; £5).

There are plenty of banks with ATMs along the High and Thames Sts. The **post office** is in Peascod St and you'll get free internet access at the **Windsor library** (☎ 01753-743940; Bachelors Acre).

Sights

WINDSOR CASTLE

The largest and oldest occupied fortress in the world, **Windsor Castle** (☎ 020-7766 7304; www.royalcollection.org.uk; adult/child £15/8.50; 🕒 9.45am-4pm Mar-Oct, to 3pm Nov-Feb) is a majestic vision of battlements and towers used for state occasions and as the Queen's weekend retreat.

William the Conqueror first established a royal residence in Windsor in 1070 when he built a motte and bailey here, the only naturally defensible spot in the Thames valley.

DIY WEEKEND

Buckinghamshire is littered with pretty villages with half-timbered houses, rose-clad cottages, old coaching inns and ancient parish churches. Grab a map, forget the guidebook and just take to the back roads to explore some of the lesser-known treasures lurking in London's backyard. Visit **Amersham** for half-timbered buildings and charming cottages; **Chenies** for old manor houses and an ancient parish church; **West Wycombe** for cottages and inns so quaint they're protected by the National Trust; or **Chalfont St Giles** and **Chalfont St Peter** for historic connections and picturesque settings.

Further north between Aylesbury and Buckingham, you'll find **Winslow**, home to an 8th-century hall designed by Sir Christopher Wren, and just south of Aylesbury, the quaint thatched cottages of **Wendover** and the half-timbered and Georgian shops in **Great Missenden**. To the north and west of Aylesbury, you'll find the extraordinary architecture of **Claydon House** in Middle Claydon, the duck decoy and tower at **Boarstall** and the 15th-century courthouse in **Long Crendon**.

Since then successive monarchs have rebuilt, remodelled and refurbished the castle complex to create the massive and sumptuous palace that stands here today. Henry II replaced the wooden stockade in 1165 with a stone round tower and built the outer walls to the north, east and south; Charles II gave the state apartments a baroque makeover; George IV swept in with his preference for Gothic style; and Queen Victoria refurbished a beautiful chapel in memory of her beloved Albert.

The castle largely escaped the bombings of WWII, but in 1992 a devastating fire tore through the building destroying or damaging more than 100 rooms. By chance, the most important treasures were in storage at the time, and with skilled craftsmanship and painstaking restoration, the rooms were returned to their former glory.

Join a free guided tour (every half hour) or take a multilingual audio tour of the lavish state rooms and beautiful chapels. The State Apartments and St George's Chapel are closed at times during the year; check the website for details. If the Queen is in residence, you'll see the Royal Standard flying from the Round Tower.

Windsor Castle is one of England's most popular attractions. Come early and be prepared to queue.

Queen Mary's Dolls' House

Your first sight will be an incredible dolls' house, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens for Queen Mary in 1924. The attention to detail is spellbinding – there's running water, electricity and lighting and vintage wine in the cellar! The house was intended to accurately depict households of the day, albeit on a scale of 1:12.

State Apartments

After the dolls' house, a **gallery** with drawings by Leonardo da Vinci and a **China Museum**, visitors enter the stunning State Apartments, home to some exquisite paintings and architecture and still used by the Queen.

The **Grand Staircase** sets the tone for the rooms, all of which are elaborate, opulent and suitably regal. Highlights include **St George's Hall**, which incurred the most damage during the fire of 1992. The dining chairs here, dwarfed by the scale of the room, are standard size. On the ceiling, the shields of the Knights of the Garter (originally from George IV's time here) were recreated after the fire.

For intimate gatherings (just 60 people), the Queen entertains in the **Waterloo Chamber** – the super shiny table is French-polished and then dusted by someone walking over it with dusters on their feet. During large parties, this room is used for dancing and the table is tripled in size and set up in St George's Hall.

The **King's Dressing Room** has some of the most important Renaissance paintings in the royal collection. Alongside Sir Anthony Van Dyck's magnificent *Triple Portrait* of Charles I, you will see works by Hans Holbein, Rembrandt, Peter Paul Rubens and Albrecht Dürer. Charles II kipped in here instead of in the **King's Bedchamber** – maybe George IV's magnificent bed (now on display) would have tempted him.

St George's Chapel

This elegant chapel, commissioned for the Order of the Garter by Edward IV in 1475, is one of Britain's finest examples of Perpendicular Gothic architecture. The nave and fan-vaulted roof were completed under

Henry VII but the final nail was struck under Henry VIII in 1528.

The chapel – along with Westminster Abbey – serves as a **royal mausoleum**, and its tombs read like a history of the British monarchy. The most recent royal burial occurred in April 2002, when the body of George VI's widow, Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother (1900–2002), was transported here in a splendid and sombre procession and buried alongside her husband. And in April 2005, Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles were blessed here following their civil marriage in the town's Guildhall.

St George's Chapel closes on Sunday, but time your visit well and you can attend Evensong at 5.15pm daily except Wednesday, or services at 10.45am, 11.45am and 5.15pm.

Albert Memorial Chapel

Originally built in 1240 and dedicated to Edward the Confessor, this small chapel was the place of worship for the Order of the Garter until St George's Chapel snatched that honour. After the death of Prince Albert at Windsor Castle in 1861, Queen Victoria ordered its elaborate redecoration as a tribute to her husband. A major feature of the restoration is the magnificent vaulted roof, whose gold mosaic pieces were crafted in Venice. There's a monument to the prince, although he's actually buried with Queen Victoria in the Frogmore Royal Mausoleum in the castle grounds.

Windsor Great Park

Stretching behind Windsor Castle almost all the way to Ascot, Windsor Great Park covers about 40 sq miles and features a lake, walking tracks, a bridleway and gardens. The **Savill Garden** (☎ 01753-860222; www.theroyallandscape.co.uk; adult/child £7/3.50; ☼ 10am–6pm Mar–Oct, to 4pm Nov–Feb) is particularly lovely and has a stunning visitor centre.

The **Long Walk** is a 3-mile jaunt along a tree-lined path from King George IV Gate to the Copper Horse statue (of George III) on Snow Hill, the highest point of the park. The Queen can occasionally be spotted driving down the Long Walk, accompanied only by a bodyguard. The walk is signposted from the town centre.

Changing of the guard

A fabulous spectacle of pomp, with loud commands, whispered conversations, triumphant

tunes from a military band and plenty of shuffling and stamping of feet, the **changing of the guard** (11am Mon–Sat Apr–Jun, alternate days Jul–Mar) draws the crowds to the castle gates each day. It's a must for any visitor, but you'll get a better view if you stay to the right of the crowd.

ETON COLLEGE

Cross the bridge over the Thames to Eton and you'll enter another world, one where old-school values and traditions seem to ooze from the very walls. The streets here are surprisingly hushed as you make your way down to the most enduring and most illustrious symbol of England's class system, **Eton College** (☎ 01753-671177; www.etoncollege.com; adult/child £4.20/3.45, tours £5.50/4.50; ☼ 10.30am–4.30pm Mar–Apr, Jul–Sep [school holidays], 2–4.30pm term time, guided tours 2.15pm & 3.15pm).

Those who have studied here include nineteen prime ministers, countless princes, kings and maharajahs, famous explorers, authors and economists, among them the Duke of Wellington, Princes William and Harry, George Orwell, Ian Fleming, Aldous Huxley, Sir Ranulph Fiennes and John Maynard Keynes.

Eton is the largest and most famous public (meaning very private) school in England. It was founded by Henry VI in 1440 with a view towards educating 70 highly qualified boys awarded a scholarship from a fund endowed by the king. Every year since then, 70 King's Scholars (aged 12 to 14) have been chosen based on the results of a highly competitive exam; these pupils are housed in separate quarters from the rest of the 1300 or so other students who are known as Oppidans.

While the King's Scholars are chosen exclusively on the basis of exam results, Oppidans must be able to foot the bill for £26,000 per-annum fees as well as passing entrance exams. All the boys are boarders and must comply with the strong traditions at Eton. The boys still wear formal tail coats, waistcoats and white collars to lessons, the school language is full of in-house jargon and fencing, and shooting, polo and beagling are on the list of school sporting activities.

Luckily for the rest of us, the college is open to visitors and a guided tour can go a long way to giving you an insight into how this most elite of schools functions. Tours take in the **chapel** (which you can see from Windsor Castle), the **cloisters**, the **Museum of Eton Life**,

A WORLD FIRST

In June 1215, King John met his barons and bishops in a large field 3 miles southeast of Windsor, and over the next few days they hammered out an agreement on a basic charter of rights guaranteeing the liberties of the king's subjects and restricting the monarch's absolute power. The document they signed was the Magna Carta, the world's first constitution. It formed the basis for statutes and charters throughout the world's democracies. (Both the national and state constitutions of the United States, drawn up more than 500 years later, paraphrase directly from this document.)

Runnymede – from the Anglo-Saxon words *ruinige* (take council) and *moed* (meadow) – was chosen because it was the largest piece of open land between the king's residence at Windsor and the bishop's palace at Staines. Today, the field remains pretty much as it was, except now it features two **lodges** (1930) designed by Sir Edward Lutyens. In the woods behind the field are two **memorials**, the first to the Magna Carta designed by Sir Edward Maufe (1957). The second is to John F Kennedy, and was built by Geoffrey Jellicoe in 1965 on an acre of land granted in perpetuity to the US government following Kennedy's assassination.

Runnymede is on the A308, 3 miles south east of Windsor. Bus 41 stops near here on the Windsor to Egham route.

the **lower school** and the **school yard**. As you wander round, you may recognise some of the buildings, as the college is often used as a film set. *Chariots of Fire*, *The Madness of King George*, *Mrs Brown* and *Shakespeare in Love* are just some of the classics that have been filmed here.

LEGOLAND WINDSOR

A fun-filled theme park of white-knuckle rides, **Legoland** (☎ 08705 040404; www.legoland.co.uk; adult/3-15yr £34/26; 🕒 hours vary) is more about the thrills of scaring yourself silly than the joys of building your own make-believe castle from the eponymous bricks. The professionals have already done this for you, with almost 40 million Lego bricks transformed into some of the world's greatest landmarks. You'll also get live shows, 3-D cinema and slightly tamer activities for the less adventurous. If you prebook online, you save about £3 off the whopping ticket prices.

The Legoland shuttle bus departs from High St and Thames St from 10am, with the last bus returning 30 minutes after the park has closed. If you're planning to take the first bus of the morning, use the High St stop as it often fills up here and consequently does not stop in Thames St.

Tours

Open-top double-decker bus tours of the town are run by **City Sightseeing Tours** (☎ 0871-666 0000; www.city-sightseeing.com; adult/child £7/4; 🕒 every ½hr daily mid-Mar–mid-Nov, Sat & Sun mid-Nov–Dec) and

leave from Castle Hill opposite the Harte & Garter Hotel. From Easter to October, **French Brothers** (☎ 01753-851900; www.frenchbrothers.co.uk; Clewer Court Rd; 🕒 11am-5pm) runs a variety of boat trips to Runnymede, Maidenhead and around Windsor and Eton. The 45-minute round trip to Runnymede costs £4.90 for adults and £2.45 for children. Boats leave from just next to Windsor Bridge. If you fancy doing the hop-on-hop-off bus plus a 35-minute boat trip, a combined boat and bus ticket costs £11.50/6.25 per adult/child.

Sleeping

Windsor has a good selection of quality hotels and B&Bs, but few budget options.

Alma Lodge (☎ 01753-855620; www.almalodge.co.uk; 58 Alma Rd; s £45-60, d £60-75; 📶 📺 wi-fi) This elegant Victorian house, within walking distance of the centre of town, has large en suite rooms with plenty of period features. A sweeping staircase greets you on arrival and ferries you up to rooms with ornate ceilings, original fireplaces and period style.

Halcyon House (☎ 01753-863262; www.halcyon-house.co.uk; 21 Clarence Rd; s/d £70/80; 📶 📺 wi-fi) Another fine Victorian house, this place offers an entirely different experience with simple stylish rooms that feature muted colour schemes and sparkling new bathrooms. The period features, such as the old fireplaces, remain but the overall effect is far more modern.

Christopher Hotel (☎ 01753-852359; www.thechristopher.co.uk; High St, Eton; r £99-200; 📶 📺 wi-fi) Set in a former coaching inn, this modern hotel offers clean-cut, uncluttered rooms with

contemporary, if a little corporate, styling. The grill downstairs has big windows overlooking the street, and it serves up a modern European menu (mains £8 to £13) in slick surroundings.

Harte & Garter (☎ 01753-863426; www.harteandgarter.com; High St; r £105-145; 🍷) Right opposite the castle and newly renovated, this Victorian hotel blends period style with modern furnishings. High ceilings, giant fireplaces, decorative cornices and dark woods seamlessly combine with contemporary fabrics, plasma-screen TVs and roll-top baths. Some rooms enjoy wonderful views over the castle and all guests can enjoy the luxurious spa in the converted stable block.

Eating

Green Olive (☎ 01753-866655; 10 High St; meze £4-10) A great spot for a light lunch or tantalising evening meal, this place dishes up generous portions of traditional Greek meze in bright, simple surroundings. You can choose from over 50 different dishes and combine a riot of flavours before rolling out the door.

Mozzarella Joes (☎ 01753-751121; www.mozzarellajoes.com; 31 Windsor Royal Station; mains £5.90-8.90) For quick eats, this bright and airy pizza joint in the station is a good bet with simple wooden tables, a good choice of tasty pizzas, pastas and salads and a friendly attitude to children.

Tower (☎ 01753-863426; High St; mains £9.50-17.50; 🍷 7-10pm) Giant windows with views over the castle give this place an immediate allure, as do the grand chandeliers and high ceilings. The menu is brasserie style with a choice of classic British cuisine featuring grills, fish and steaks simply and perfectly done. It's also a good spot to sample the finest of English institutions, afternoon tea.

Gilbey's Bar & Restaurant (☎ 01753-854921; 82-83 High St, Eton; mains £12.50-21.50, set menu 2-course/3-course £13.75/18.75) This small restaurant in Eton has the feel of a Continental cafe, with terracotta tiling and a sunny courtyard garden and conservatory. The superb modern British menu is almost surpassed by the wide and interesting choice of wines, making it one of the top spots to eat in town.

Other options include:

Al Fassia (☎ 01753-855370; 27 St Leonard's Rd; mains £9.50-13.50) An atmospheric Moroccan restaurant with traditional decor and menu.

Crooked House Tea Rooms (☎ 01753-857534; 51 High St; afternoon tea £7-12; 🍷 10.30am-6pm Mon-Fri,

DETOUR: ROYAL ASCOT

Get out your glad rags and join the glitterati at **Royal Ascot** (☎ 0870-727 1234; www.ascot.co.uk) for the biggest racing meet of the year. The royal family, A-list celebs and the rich and famous gather here to show off their Jimmy Choos and place the odd bet. The four-day festival takes place in mid-June and it's essential to book tickets well in advance. You can soak up the atmosphere from the Silver Ring for a mere £15 per day, or head for the Grandstand and Paddock where you can rub shoulders with the great and the good for £54 per day. Just make sure you dress to impress.

10am-7pm Sat & Sun) A traditional tearoom complete with sloping floors, wooden beams and royal cream teas.

Drinking

Windsor and Eton are packed with pubs, with a cluster under the railway arches of the central station.

our pick Two Brewers (☎ 01753-855426; 34 Park St)

This 17th-century inn perched on the edge of Windsor Great Park is close to the castle's tradesmen's entrance and supposedly frequented by staff from the castle. It's a quaint and cosy place with dim lighting, obituaries to castle footmen and royal photographs with irreverent captions on the wall.

Henry VI (☎ 01753-866051; 37 High St, Eton) Another old pub, but this time the low ceilings and subtle lighting are mixed with leather sofas and modern design. It's the kind of place where you can sit back with an afternoon pint and read the paper. There's a nice garden for alfresco dining and live music at weekends.

Vanilla (☎ 01753-831122; 15A Goswell Hill; admission £2-10) This uber-trendy boutique bar and club plays everything from funk and rock to indie and house beats, and it has a champagne-and-cocktail bar and a snappy dress code.

Entertainment

Firestation (☎ 01753-866865; www.windsorartscentre.org; nr St Leonard's & St Mark's Rds) hosts a range of comedy, film, theatre, music and dance events with plenty for interest for kids.

The **Theatre Royal** (☎ 01753-853888; www.theatreroyalwindsor.co.uk; 32-34 Thames St) features a wide repertoire of theatre productions from pantomime to first runs.

READING FESTIVAL

Each August Bank Holiday weekend about 240,000 revellers descend on the rather industrial town of Reading for one of the country's biggest music events. The **Reading Festival** (www.readingfestival.com) is a three-day extravaganza that features top acts in pop, rock and dance music. Tickets will set you back about £65 per day or £155 for a three-day pass.

Getting There & Away

Windsor is 21 miles west of central London and only about 15 minutes by car from Heathrow airport.

BUS

Green Line bus 702 departs for Windsor and Legoland from London Victoria coach station (£2 to £8 depending on time of travel, 1½ hours, hourly, about every two hours Sunday). Bus 77 connects Windsor with Heathrow airport (one hour). Buses depart from the High St, Windsor, opposite the Parish Church.

TRAIN

There are two Windsor and Eton train stations – trains from Central station on Thames St go to London Paddington (27 to 43 minutes) and trains from Riverside station, near the bridge to Eton, go to London Waterloo (56 minutes). Services run half-hourly from both stations and tickets cost £7.70.